3
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

3
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

Ichiro Sakaki Illustration Yuugen

3

Contents

Chapter One:
Yup, It's
Another World

Chapter Two:
Lunatic

Chapter Three:
Soccer…
Soccer?

Chapter Four:
The Hero Stands
upon the Field

Epilogue

Afterword

"Huh?"
Amutech General Manager—Kanou Shinichi
"I see you're surprised, Master."
Eldant Maid Girl—Myusel Fourant
"We are most eager to taste it as well."
Holy Eldant Empress—Petralka an Eldant III

"Yarf!"
Amutech In-House Artist—Elvia Harnelman, Werewolf
"Yessir."
Groundskeeper at Shinichi's Mansion—Brooke Darwin, the Lizardman
AMUTECH IS A COMPANY PROMOTING OTAKU CULTURE IN THE HOLY ELDANT EMPIRE.
AmuTec
"Brooke, let's take all these out of here and set them over there."
Otaku Evangelist to the Isekai—Kanou Shinichi
Private First Class, Japan Self-Defense Force—Koganuma Minori
Figure Version Announced!
Her Imperial Majesty Petralka
The ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire is now an adorable figurine! Don't miss this special, limited-edition item!
(Produced and sold by: Amutech)

Chapter One: Yup, It's Another World

I, Kanou Shinichi, was on the horns of a dilemma.

Warm, wet breath brushed against my cheek. I couldn't help noticing how very white the fangs in those open jaws were...

What a dumb thing to be thinking at a time like this!

I'd heard that when people are in a really life-threatening situation, they sometimes forget where they are, as a sort of coping mechanism. Maybe that was what was happening to me. Why else would I be admiring trivial details, instead of trying to find a way to get out from under the fang-baring beast who had just jumped on top of me the moment we saw each other?

A moist tongue emerged from the dark cavern of its mouth and ran over its teeth. I guessed it was licking its lips at the sight of prey. It might as well have exclaimed, "Bon appétit!"

I was literally, like, five seconds away from dying.

This is bad. This is really, really bad.

*This is really, really, really,

The beast was using its limbs to pin my arms and legs. The creature wasn't actually that heavy, but it seemed to know how to hold a person down—it was pressing precisely on the muscles I most needed to be able to move. I tried to make my extremities work, but I couldn't sit up or scramble away. Now I knew how a cornered animal felt.

Predators who use up energy unnecessarily just bring themselves closer to starvation, so when they hunt, they strike only the most vital points on their prey to prevent any resistance. The pinned, powerless bunny rabbit (i.e., me) can only lie there trembling and waiting for the inevitable.

To put it in chess terms, it was checkmate. I couldn't move anything really useful, and that left me without a lot of options.

Was this how it was all going to end? Eaten in my own house by some unidentified creature, with no idea what had really happened to me or why?

No—wait, Kanou Shinichi! You aren't a rabbit! You still have the most powerful weapon humans possess!

My mind started working desperately. *Humans have intelligence. We have our wits! That's what separates us from the animals!* Now my brain labored to dispel the haze of panic. I needed a phat plan to break me out of this jam!

Arms? Legs? Pinned flat.

Fingers? Mobile, but there was nothing to grab.

Head? I could try a headbutt, but with my arms held down like this, I had serious doubts that I could reach my opponent.

Think... Think... Think...

What's this? Human intelligence is exhausted?

Despair overtook me as I ruminated. I found that you can think of whatever you want, but if you don't have the physical power to pull it off, it's not going to do you any good. Look, I might have been sort of a big deal when it came to arguing on the internet, but punch me or stab me and, well, that was it.

No—wait again!

I can't give up yet!

Words! Maybe I could talk my way out! *That's it, Kanou Shinichi! You still have the power to throw up a smokescreen of pointless chatter!*

I placed all my hope in the very last weapon available to me.

O Spirit of Words, speak through me! Help me say something really

awesome! Help me throw this creature off with my gift of the gab!

"Uh... Um..."

No response.

"Can I... talk to you for a minute?"

No response.

Whaaaa?!

Aw, this isn't going to do any good! What am I even doing?! Chatter doesn't help if the other person doesn't understand what you're saying! The beast on top of me stared at me with a glint in its eyes, obviously ready to dig in at any moment.

"A beast...?"

I'm not about to say that I'd calm down, but a quasi-rational thought did suddenly strike me.

As we've established, I was in a room, indoors. The curtains and windows were closed, making everything dark. But the morning sun that leaked in between the drapery was just enough to dimly illuminate the creature holding me down. It was deep in shadow, yes, but the darkness wasn't total; I could make out a little bit.

On top of that, my eyes were slowly getting used to the dark. My attacker's jaws were perilously close to my head, filling my vision. But if I could stay calm enough to pull my own head back, maybe I could at least get a sense of who I was dealing with here.

When I did, I let out a sound of dumbfoundment.

".....Huh?"

The creature's face seemed to be covered in fur; that was why I had immediately thought "wild animal." But on closer inspection, it was just really long hair falling down around its face.

Well, not quite. The hair was definitely more fur-like than normal.

"Hold on..."

My eyes had finally adjusted, and I could make out the contours of the face in front of me. I hadn't imagined the gleaming eyes and the fangs; there was definitely a beastly quality to this person. But...

"Elvia?!"

Yep. The face was that of a girl I knew well. Elvia Harneiman, a werewolf. She had long ears covered in beast-y fur, and (better believe it) a big, fluffy tail.

I use the word “werewolf,” but she wasn’t really some kind of supernatural monster. She was just a girl, and a pretty cute one at that. Her big, round eyes and her slightly unkempt hair were the most distinctive things about her. She wasn’t very showy, but her plain looks had an attractiveness all their own.

I was very confused, first because someone had suddenly jumped on top of me and pinned me down, and (more importantly) second, because of the hungry-animal eyes with which that person had looked at me. Taken together, I had been left with no idea that this was my normally laid-back, easygoing housemate. Most of the time, Elvia was less of a wolf and more of a puppy.

Then again, and on careful reflection, this *was* Elvia’s room. Breakfast time had come around and Elvia hadn’t shown up, so I’d come to check on her. This being Elvia’s room, it was only natural that the inhabitant was Elvia, and therefore even more natural that it was Elvia who had jumped on top of me. Wait a second... *Was* that natural?

“Okay... uh... Elvia...-san?”

“*Hooo... haaaah...*”

The only answer was the continued slap of moist, warm breath against my face. I took a fresh look into her glowing eyes, and I couldn’t shake the sense that it wasn’t the gaze of a rational being. If this were a manga, her eyes would have spirals in them to suggest that she wasn’t in her right mind.

This was bad. I mean *really* bad.

Yes, I had gone from being pinned down by a mysterious beast to being pinned down by a girl I knew, but nothing else had changed. If anything, this was probably worse. Being eaten alive by a wild animal—I mean, I for sure didn't want that. But being eaten alive by a girl I was friends with—what kind of bizarre horror-story stuff was that?

How can I explain this? It was like being betrayed by something you trusted. No, not quite... It was like one day, a cute little stuffed toy suddenly grew fangs and attacked you. The fear came from the rupturing of the quotidian expectations of everyday life.

Enough! Now was not the time for meta-commentary.

If I was dealing with a girl, here, then my idea of talking my way out of this might still work.

"Elvia... Let's all just calm down, okay?"

"*Hooo... hooo ...*"

"Right, put those fangs away, now. Say, were... were your teeth always this long?"

"*Hooo... haaaah...*"

Her jaws were open in an ear-to-ear grin. Her tongue, bright red, slid across her lips.

"That... That lip-licking thing you keep doing is really... kind of unsettling. Uh... Breakfast is on the table, you know. If you're hungry, how about you come have some?"

"*Haaaah... haaaah...*"

"Hey, if I've done anything to upset you, I apologize. L-Let's talk it out, Elvia."

"*Haaaah... hooo...*"

This wasn't getting me anywhere. It was like she couldn't even hear me. In fact—

"Eeyikes!"

I found myself letting out a terrified scream. Not only had my coaxing not convinced her to come have breakfast; instead, she shoved her face right up next to mine and, as if to say "Bon appétit for *really real*!", licked my cheek with her tongue.

"S-See? I don't taste so good, right?"

No response.

“Myusel makes a breakfast that’s much more delicious than me! How about you have some, Elvia?”

No response.

Elvia didn’t say anything, but her tongue worked its way from my cheek down my neck. This was about all I could take.

Kanou Shinichi, dead at seventeen.

Eaten by a beast girl he met in an alternate world.

Ugh. I really didn’t want to end up with *that* carved into my tombstone. Actually, my family was Buddhist, so that wasn’t the sort of thing we would have put on a grave marker anyway.

Once again I found myself thinking a bunch of random and totally useless things.

“.....Huh?”

The fangs never came. In fact, Elvia, having finished her tour of my throat, seemed to have taken an interest in my clavicle and was now proceeding on to my chest. I thought I had read somewhere that when a carnivore wants to finish off its prey, they usually do it with a bite to the throat. Maybe werewolves didn’t work the same way?

“Elvia...-san?”

“*Haaaah... Hooo...*”

Elvia grabbed my shirt in her mouth with what seemed to be annoyance, then shook her head violently, tearing it. When she found she couldn’t pull it off, she straddled my hips and began ripping at it with her hands. Her claws shredded it is easily as if she were mulching a piece of paper. There was way more strength in that little body than you would expect.

This had to be...

“Hold on.”

Yeah, hold on.

It couldn’t be...

A beast girl. Crazy eyes. Not acting normal. Harsh breath. The words came together in my mind like the pieces of a puzzle, and they all pointed to one thing.

“Hey, Elvia, you aren’t...?”

No response, of course.

“H-Hey, that tickles, it tick—oh! No! You can’t go— Elvia! Eeeeyikes!”

Elvia had licked my chest and then continued downward...

“Elvia! Elvia-san! You can’t— This isn’t the place for— Well, it sort of is, but— Just stop!”

No answer at all. Elvia went along, sniffing and licking my body.

When I looked at her again, it occurred to me that she was practically naked. Elvia was never one to wear a lot of clothing, and while in her room she basically stripped down to her underwear. I’d seen her in her room before, so this wasn’t exactly new to me, but under the circumstances it seemed a little more erotic—I mean very erotic—I mean endlessly, infinitely erotic. The cleft of her breasts was completely visible above the tube top wrapped around her chest, and as far as her bottom half, she had traded her usual pants for what amounted to a loincloth, way sexier than hot pants or whatever.

Finally it started to register: she wanted to eat me, all right... but not for breakfast!

“No effin’ way! You want to eat me like *that*?!”

What had I done to deserve this reward?! Was I about to cash in my V-card?!

No! This is not the time to be thrilled about this!

“Whoa! Elvia, you can’t, you’ve got to stop!”

I won’t try to deny my libido, but I do fancy myself a gentleman with a certain modesty. No, seriously.

And anyway, in the 3D world, you can cause all kinds of trouble for yourself by touching a girl. I was sticking to 2D brides! Okay, not really, but if you let yourself get carried away, you can wind up in some very scary places.

“*Hooo... haaaah...*”

Still, my words were obviously not getting through to Elvia.

She had never really been the type to jump a guy, so this had to be due to, you know, estrus or something. I mean, that’s the trope, right? Beast girls go into heat!

It’s just instinct, it’s just instinct! I repeated over and over to myself. *She can’t help it! I can’t act like she’s hot for* me*, because it’s just instinct and she’s innocent! Deeply and totally innocent! As if that changes anything!*

My words, of course, were powerless in the face of her overwhelming elemental drive. But that didn’t stop me from shouting, “No, no, no, don’t, don’t, don’t—Elvia, doooooon’t!” My words rang through the house,

accompanied by the sound of my pants ripping.

My name is Kanou Shinichi. I'm general manager of the parallel-world-first general entertainment company Amutech.

My story begins at the dawn of the twenty-first century...

In Japanese domestic territory, specifically in the "Sea of Trees" near Mount Fuji, a hyperspace tunnel to another world was discovered. An alternate plane of existence, just a hop, skip, and a jump away from us.

The tunnel isn't very wide, and there's no way to either enlarge it or block it off, so it sat there, a ripple in spacetime.

In utmost secrecy, the Japanese government sent a survey unit through the tunnel, and they succeeded in making contact with the organisms who ruled this new land—a human state. They convinced this state, the Holy Eldant Empire, to open relations with Japan in the interests of a mutually brighter future.

This other world was something of a godsend, and our unlikely encounter with it almost certainly a first in human history. The establishment of cordial relations was a real coup.

Japan, however, didn't trumpet any of this; instead, they kept it all dead secret. This was due to certain expectations that had coalesced among the country's ruling elite.

This was another world, after all. It had unknown lifeforms, culture, technology—and resources. The cultural level of the Eldant Empire was on a par with Middle Ages Europe, so there might not be much to gain from them technologically, but the biological and mineral resources here were all but untouched—practically no one even knew whether they were there. That meant it would be easy to bilk the Eldant Empire into handing them over. Start with some pleasant "dialogue" to get their guard down, and then it was open season on whatever was over there. At any rate, that seems to have been the deplorable thinking taking place among the less savory elements of the Japanese government at the time.

But the best laid plans of mice and men go oft awry... even the nastiest ones.

The government had made first contact and enticed the empire to open relations, but what should they use to promote "friendship"? The magic in this new world made it easy enough to communicate; the trouble came after that. The Japanese delegation brought over lots of little gifts—all kinds of traditional cultural trinkets—in hopes of currying favor with the Eldant Empire, but the Eldant side just didn't seem that interested in any of them.

The fact that the size of the hyperspace tunnel was constrained, and that they were trying to do all this without alerting any other countries, meant that very large objects, or large numbers of objects, couldn't be brought over to the new world. Too much activity, and America or someone was sure to smell a rat, and then Japan's plum little find would be snatched away from it.

What the Japanese government hit on then was the same thing that had powered Cool Japan—a bit of uniquely Japanese culture that had proved capable of crossing linguistic and cultural barriers. That's right: anime, manga, video games, and light novels. Otaku culture.

As it happened, this otaku stuff was every bit as popular in the Eldant Empire as it had been elsewhere on Earth. So Japan set about really leaning into the otaku angle, and Amutech was their foothold for doing so.

Now, this plan was very much the work of bureaucrats, people who were not well equipped to deal with the unprecedented and who didn't even know what kinds of otaku goods might be worth sending over. On top of that, they were busy with domestic infighting because of an impending change in administration, and the government didn't have the time, the budget, or the people to give its full attention to deciding which cartoons would be most interesting to a bunch of Middle-Ages peasants in some other universe. So the bureaucrats did what bureaucrats do best: they delegated.

"What if," they thought, "we grab ourselves an otaku from somewhere and send him over to run the company for us?"

So they set up a front company, ran a help-wanted ad worthy of a gang of swindlers, and found a dyed-in-the-wool otaku and former home security guard whom they gleefully sent packing through the hyperspace tunnel. That was me, Kanou Shinichi.

“Hrrnngrrahgghhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

An inarticulate scream echoed through the house. It was weird-sounding enough to make me pretty embarrassed for myself, but what else could I do? Elvia was licking me *all over*, and it kind of felt good but also really tickled, and I was finding it hard to sound like a normal person.

Elvia Harneiman. A self-described wandering artist—and, as we’ve established, a werewolf; in other words, half-beast.

In this other world, beast people were treated as being among the “humanoid races.” That is, Elvia’s cutely drooping ears and adorably fluffy tail were no more remarkable than a difference of skin color would be back on Earth.

Her words and actions, her understanding of what constituted common sense, weren’t that far removed from those of a human; she really wasn’t so different from us. “Beast person” she might have been, but that mostly just meant she had ears and tail (not that those aren’t very important moe points!). I had completely let down my guard.

I had forgotten that being a beast person meant that yes, she was half person, but she was also half beast.

Elvia had explained to me once that beast people had to learn skills that allowed them to sublimate their strong hunting instincts into things they could really get absorbed in. If they followed their instincts to their natural ends—the hunting of everything from livestock to humans—civilized society might not last very long.

In Elvia’s case, she learned to draw. In the sense that this involved following something with your eyes, thereby taking it into yourself, it had an obvious resemblance to hunting. It was probably similar to what a human felt when tracking prey with a rifle, or for that matter taking candid shots with a camera.

But all of this only dealt with the hunting instinct. There were, uh, *other* instincts that a little bit of artwork couldn’t address.

“Elvia! Elvia!” I kept shouting her name, hoping it would return her to sanity, but it was as if she couldn’t hear me.

Of course, unlike when a man forces himself on a woman, a woman

trying to force herself on a man needs the—well, the *participation* of a certain part of that man.

But woe was me: some small amount of hesitation aside, as a healthy teenage guy, when a girl got this close to me, that part of me definitely wanted to participate. Plus, Elvia was plump in all the right places and thin where a girl should be thin. She was extremely—I mean, she had the sort of body that naturally caused the little guy to *sit up* and take notice. She had a pretty nice face to boot, and anyway, we were talking about getting with a real, live *wild thing* here. Not an opportunity you'd ever get in Japan.

Add on to all that the classic extenuating circumstances: "I'm in heat! And because I'm in heat—I mean, I would never normally do this, I'm not that sort of girl, but what the hell, I'm in heat!" I hate to say it, but I could hardly call myself an otaku if I didn't rise to the occasion.

All that's to say that even though I personally didn't necessarily want this, the rest of me was all set and ready to go.

"*Hooo... Hooo...*"

Elvia impatiently tore off her underwear. She had already shredded my pants, and I was only wearing my own thin underwear. With her strength, Elvia could have ripped through a pair of made-in-Japan synthetic fiber pants with no trouble.

Kanou Shinichi... your chastity is in danger!

Farewell, my purity, which I've guarded lo these seventeen years!

Er... Actually, I guess I wasn't exactly going out of my way to protect it.

As my heart pounded and these thoughts raced through my head—

"Master?"

—a girl suddenly peeked in the door.

She had long, flaxen hair tied in two tails, and she was awfully cute.

Twintails are often treated as shorthand for a snarky tsundere girl, but this girl was just the opposite, an open and mature and very modest maiden. Plus, she was wearing a frilly headdress that pretty much announced she was a maid, her willowy body ensconced in a dark one-piece dress accompanied by a white apron (also frilly).

"Myusel?!"

Myusel Fourant. That was her name.

As her appearance suggested, she was the maid of this household, and my personal caretaker.

I looked at her imploringly. “Help m—”

“M-Master...”

Myusel, however, seemed frozen with shock as she took in the sight of me and Elvia. Her big emerald eyes, open so wide they looked like they might fall out of her head, were filled with a torrent of emotion.

“...Oh.”

I realized how this must look: Elvia, all but buck naked. Me, wearing one measly pair of underpants. And then Elvia straddling me—okay, not my crotch; she was perched a little higher up than that, but not much. And then add in the little detail of her saliva dripping from my face and neck. Frankly, it would be stranger *not* to misconstrue what was happening.

Still, I couldn’t keep myself from exclaiming, “Th-This isn’t what it looks like!”

Crap! That always means it’s exactly what it looks like!

It was just the sort of thing that would make someone assume I was lying—but since it actually *wasn’t* what it looked like, what else was I supposed to say?

“This—This is all a misunderstanding! I—”

Myusel continued to stand there, displaying no reaction to anything I said. In that sense, she was a lot like Elvia, although one of them was frozen and the other was boiling over.

Then a calm voice came from behind Myusel. “Men are all the same.”

Another girl emerged from behind the maid. She had black hair pulled into a bun, keeping it neat and rather pretty. She didn’t have the flash to really draw people’s attention, but she did have a certain calming effect, a warm fuzziness to her.

I had never asked her how old she was, but I would’ve said maybe in her early twenties. The glasses she wore, combined with her baby face, could make her look like a teenager from the right angle—in fact, I would say they usually did. But you couldn’t miss her chest—the two great round bulges that pushed up her uniform screamed “Grown-up!” without saying a word.

Koganuma Minori-san. She was Japanese, just like me; as a matter of fact, she was a WAC with the Japan Self-Defense Force, living here as my bodyguard. A gallant older woman charged with protecting me, she carried a 9mm handgun and a 9mm machine gun in case there was any trouble. At

least, that was how it was supposed to go.

"M-Minori-san!"

"Shinichi-kun, is this what you meant when you said you were going to go 'check on' Elvia? Just what is happening in here?"

"What's happening? What's it *look* like?!"

"Oh, I know what it looks like."

"I mean—no, this isn't what it looks like! I need help!"

"Gosh, and here I thought you two were getting along so well."

"What's with the banter?! Help me already!"

From the moment she had announced "men are all the same," it became obvious that this was not someone I was going to be able to rely on in the last extremity. She was going to react to what was in front of her, and not well—if anything, she seemed to be enjoying the fact that I was in trouble at that moment.

"So you want me to help you?"

It only took me a second to respond, "O-Of course I do!"

"Ooh! I heard the hesitation in your voice!"

"This is no time to be clever!" I said, practically crying.

Truth be told, it wasn't as if I had an aversion to Elvia, or for that matter to fooling around, but the last thing I wanted was for my very first time to be observed by Myusel and Minori-san.

"Okay." Minori-san nodded, then suddenly crouched and picked up something next to her. She must have brought it with her—had it ready to go.

It was a bucket, the kind you would use for drawing water.

Inside, of course, was—

My face twisted in alarm. "Hold on—Minori-san!"

"This is the best way to deal with an animal in heat," she said with a bright smile. Then, with a shout and not a moment's hesitation, she dumped the brimming bucket of cold water right over me and Elvia.

Gosh...

It was a few minutes later.

“Gee, I’m real sorry about that,” Elvia said.

She had regained her sanity pretty much right away.

We were sitting in the dining area of our house. It had a fireplace and a sofa and a big grandfather clock. It was pretty much the stereotypical “Western mansion” look. Pretty different from the average modern Japanese living space. The sheer size of it was remarkable—close to twenty mats. There was furniture here and there so residents could relax. It looked less like a living space and more like what we might consider a reception room.

But, moving on.

After dousing us from head to toe with freezing water, Minori-san had forcibly moved me and Elvia to this room. Myusel brought some towels so we could dry off, then she brought a change of clothes. Only after that was I finally able to relax a little.

Elvia was in her usual outfit, with her belly button and shoulders on full display, but she had calmed down a bit now, and that seemed to blunt the striking eroticism she’d had earlier. That, in turn, allowed the smallest *member* of our group to relax, too.

However...

“When it gets to be that phase of the moon, I just can’t stop myself...” Elvia was shrinking into the couch, looking very apologetic.

“‘That phase of the moon’?” So was that, like... You know? That thing in *The Diary of Anne Frank*? I mean, okay, forget the diary.

Come to think of it, when my little sister got hers the first time, our mom made this special red rice. I had no idea why and kept prying and snooping until she clotheslined me. In my young heart, I couldn’t understand why I deserved more than a little smack. But forget about all that.

“You know, you did seem a little different in there.” This came from Myusel, who was considerably more at ease now.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry ’bout that.” Elvia scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. “It just started for me, so it’s all...”

“Ah, is that why you have trouble controlling it?”

“Sorry again. I’ll clean up the fur later.”

“Setting aside the smell—fur?” I asked, frowning.

Now that she mentioned it, Elvia’s body did seem unusually furry.

“Lycanthropes have it rough that way, don’t they?” Myusel said, as if this all made perfect sense to her. I still hadn’t quite put all the pieces

together. I looked back at Minori-san, but she only shrugged. Even though she had been in this world longer than I had, she didn't seem to be any more knowledgeable than me about this.

"Uh... Elvia? I have to admit, this isn't quite clicking for me."

"Oh... You're an off-worlder, aren't you, Shinichi-sama?" She seemed to see what the problem was. She scratched her cheek. "You don't have werewolves where you come from, do you?"

"In legends and myths, sure. But they don't actually exist... I'm pretty sure."

"I can see why you wouldn't know about this, then," Elvia said with a nod. Then she continued, "The lycanthropes, the tribes that are half beast? Once a month there's a time when we kind of... go back to our roots, I guess you could say. Become more beast-like."

"You mean like at the full moon?"

"Yeah, right. That's it," Elvia said happily. "It differs a little from person to person—some of us get hairier, or some people smell worse, and others, maybe their ears or tails grow longer, or they get more muscular and powerful. That sort of thing."

"Does anyone ever transform?"

After all, a wolf man transforming on the night of the full moon is sort of the original werewolf legend. On Earth, a werewolf is usually someone who's normally human, but turns into a wolf on nights when the moon is full. But Elvia had her animal features, her ears and her tail, all the time. Then again, maybe I was being misled by the way beast people in this world perpetually occupied that liminal space between human and animal; maybe it was causing me to arbitrarily imagine that werewolves here never transformed.

Still, it seemed that phases of the moon did influence werewolves here and have physical effects on their bodies. It might not quite qualify as "transformation," but...

"Yeah, it's pretty rare for someone's whole bodily structure to change," Elvia said.

Huh. So that meant it *did* happen sometimes. That would definitely count as transformation. The fact that even those sorts of changes fell under the rubric of "individual differences" was... I don't know if it was awesome, or kind of lazy. Was this all dictated by genetics or what?

“So... How do I put this? The more beast-like we become, the stronger our appetites get. The desires kind of well up from within us, and we can’t ignore them. Again, just how forceful they are varies, but in my case...” She smiled, embarrassed. “Well, ‘that phase’ only just started for me...”

“Hang on a second,” I said, astonished. “I guess I never asked, but Elvia, how old are you?”

Doesn’t a girl usually get her first period somewhere around middle school? I knew Shizuki, at least, was in sixth grade when it happened.

“The average age in Japan is twelve or thirteen,” Minori-san broke in. “But some girls need that red rice as young as eight years old, and others have to wait until their late teens, you know. Besides, who’s to say that it would work the same way for Elvia as it does for humans?”

Although both of our worlds evidently used euphemisms that amounted to the same thing, they seemed to point to opposite phenomena. Usually, human women experienced blood loss accompanied by pain or fatigue. But Elvia and the beast people apparently experienced heightened physical abilities.

“I’m fifteen,” Elvia said shyly.

Yikes.

To see Elvia, who usually had no trouble walking around with half her body exposed, all embarrassed like this was oddly intriguing.

“Wait a second, fifteen?” I had assumed she was at least my age, if not older. Hadn’t we first met because she came here to spy for the kingdom of Bahairam? Even granted that she may or may not have been fully aware of her role, I had never imagined Bahairam would stoop to sending kids to do their dirty work. I had assumed she must be at least eighteen or nineteen. Besides that, maybe having Minori-san around had given me an unconscious bias toward the idea that just because someone looked really young didn’t mean they weren’t a proper adult.

Now that I thought about it, though, during Japan’s civil wars in the sixteenth century, the coming-of-age ceremony often took place at around fifteen years old. The idea that eighteen or twenty was the age at which you became an adult was something established by the post-World War II civil code.

“Anyway, like I said, I... I’m just not used to it yet...” Elvia seemed to shrink even further as she spoke. In other words, because “that phase of the

moon" had just begun, she didn't yet know how to deal with the increased desires and instinctual behaviors that accompanied it.

"What you're saying is, you jumped on Shinichi-kun purely out of instinct," Minori-san said. Well, that was a succinct summary.

Elvia nodded. "I'm very sorry. It's not just hunting and stuff... Certain other desires get stronger, too..."

"No way," I murmured. What a fantastic instinct! She was *actually in heat*! In other words—

"That stuff makes you too frisky!"

Imitating Ohtsuka A**o's rasp was awfully difficult.

Sorry. Never mind.

When I questioned Elvia a little further, I found out that she had first experienced "her phase" about two months before, but that she had somehow managed to keep it under control the first couple of times, hiding it from us. That had the effect, however, of making her feel a little bit unhappy all the time. And today it had finally gotten away from her.

"But do you get so out of control that you'd do it with just any guy?" I asked. I didn't know how werewolves felt about love, but if your instincts drove you to do it with someone you didn't even know, then when you finally came to, you might discover your first time had scarred you for life.

I did recall Elvia saying something about how since I had saved her life, she wouldn't necessarily mind if I jumped her. Did that suggest werewolves weren't super uptight about chastity?

"Oh, uh, that—" Elvia gave an ambiguous smile and couldn't quite seem to look at me; she was blushing. "That isn't... That's not necessarily the case."

"Oh ho!" Minori-san leaned in at this. "So you won't do it with just anyone, but you'd do it with Shinichi-kun?"

Elvia was silent.

Hey, that's no fair! She was usually so easygoing, or kind of rough around the edges—and now of all times, she decided to be coy? What happened to "it'd be okay if you jumped me"? How out of character was this?!

Thoughts like that were racing through my mind, and my heart was going every bit as fast.

"Ohh. Uhh... Hmm."

“What’s with the look?” I said.

Minori-san had turned to me, transparently enjoying herself. And here I thought she was only into yaoi! “You’re one popular guy, Shinichi-kun. I guess everyone has their moment in the sun, huh?”

Uh-huh. Isn’t a moment in the sun supposed to give you a nice tan? Elvia pouncing on me this morning was more like a sunburn. Whatever.

“Huh. Is this what it means to be ‘popular’?”

I thought that usually implied more than one girl was interested in you. I didn’t think Elvia alone qualified as me being “popular.”

“Think of it this way,” Minori-san said. “You live in a house with a maid-san and a beast girl. You’ve unlocked the Beginner Harem achievement.”

“Yeah, sure. And which game is that in?”

What did she think this was, some kind of ero-game?

“Again, I’m really, really sorry,” Elvia said. According to her, this “phase of the moon” stuff only afflicted lycanthropes; humans didn’t experience the same thing. Given that society here put humans on top and looked down on demi-humans, the goal became to be as much like a human as possible—and so something like the “phase,” which only affected demi-humans, was considered very embarrassing.

“Because of the way it makes us more beast-like,” Elvia explained.

“It certainly does that,” I said with a wry smile. “But I mean, you *are* a ‘beast’ person, right?”

I wasn’t sure why she was making such a big deal about it all of a sudden. Beast girls going into heat; wasn’t that pretty much par for the course?

Elvia looked at me and said, “Doesn’t it... bother you?”

“Doesn’t what bother me?”

She blinked in surprise. “You know, the way I’m... different from a human. With the ‘phase’ and all...”

“No way! I love it!” I said, flashing her a thumbs-up as if to say *Way to go!*

Yes, I had been pretty surprised when she knocked me over all of a sudden, but checking the goes-into-heat box only raised Elvia’s moe level in my eyes. True, one could ask what good it did to raise that level, but let’s forget about that.

“I think it’s... forceful,” I said, “but it doesn’t creep me out or anything.”

Elvia looked at me blankly. Had I really said something that surprising?

“Just communicate with us,” I said. “There’s a bunch of different ways we can handle this. Like, just let us know when your... urges are at their strongest, and I can make sure to keep clear of you. Stuff like that. If you have to keep getting buckets of ice water dumped over your head, you’re gonna catch a cold one day.”

“Shinichi-sama...”

Elvia’s expression, which had been stiff with caution and fear, slowly melted into a beaming smile. *Wow, cute.* As an otaku who prided himself on having wide and generous interests, I was all for kuuderes and tsunderes and whatever, but there was definitely a lot to be said for a bright, earnest smile like that.

“You’re not just gonna let this slide, are you?” Minori-san said with a pat on the shoulder—Myusel’s shoulder. The maid had ended up as something of a passive observer in this conversation.

“Oh, uh, no, ma’am. I’ll do my best,” she said reflexively, as if snapping out of a stupor. Then she said, “Wha? Oh—you—you mean me?” She looked around, only now taking the situation in.

“Who else would I be talking to?”

“Oh, no, I just—” Myusel looked at the ground, blushing right up to her pointy ears.

Incidentally, Myusel was of mixed blood, half human and half elf, and it was a bit of a sensitive issue with her. She didn’t worry too much about us seeing her ears around the house, but when we went outside she always arranged her hair to make sure it covered her ears. She might face discrimination if people knew she was a half-blood.

“If I may,” interjected the conversation’s second passive observer, “is it all right to take this back outside?”

Passive Observer No. 2 indicated the bucket Minori-san had used to douse us. This newest speaker didn’t sound like he had had any real interest in the conversation up to this point—although I admit his face and voice weren’t the easiest to read.

Brooke Darwin, our groundskeeper, and also the person in this room that someone from modern Japan would consider most obviously “not human.”

That was because he was a lizardman. He had a long, almost conical

head, scales all over his face and body, jaws that looked like a gouge in his face—and then there was the tongue that slipped thoughtfully in and out of his mouth. He gave an unavoidably reptilian impression; despite his height, he looked very much like a lizard that had started walking on two legs.

Even in this world, where demi-humans weren't an unusual sight, lizardmen stood out. They were often treated as separate even from other beast people.

I kind of assumed Elvia wouldn't try to get with Brooke even if there weren't any other guys around. Biologically, they just seemed too different.

"Oh, yeah, that's fine. Thanks," Minori-san said.

On that note, it sounded like Minori-san hadn't actually known about Elvia's being in heat. She just knew there was some kind of commotion—when I screamed, she went and got the bucket from Brooke on the premise that it would be helpful no matter what was going on. "At the very least, stun guns are more effective when someone is soaking wet, right?" she'd said. She was one scary lady.

"I'll excuse myself, then," offered Brooke, heading out of the dining area.

As I watched him go I remarked, "Different races really do have different concepts of what's embarrassing, don't they?"

I was just kind of thinking aloud, not especially looking for agreement or anything, but Minori-san said, "Maybe you're right. You know how much values and perspectives can differ just from country to country or even era to era. I guess it shouldn't be surprising if things look different to someone who's a completely separate form of life."

"Come to think of it, what's the deal with reptilian senses, again? They have pit organs or something, right?"

Pit organs are a special biological feature of some reptiles that allow them to sense infrared radiation. This allows them to "see" prey animals like birds and mice, whose body temperatures are always higher than the ambient. Or something like that, anyway. Basically, it's like they have special eyes for seeing things on the infrared spectrum. It wouldn't be surprising to discover the world was a different place for them.

"I thought that was only snakes," Minori-san said with a puzzled look. "I feel like lizards don't have pit organs. Anyway, I don't know if lizardmen are actually closer to lizards or snakes, or if they're something else

altogether."

True enough. The name "lizardmen" came from their lizard-like appearance, but that didn't mean everything we knew about reptiles from our world would apply to them. If that were the case, then how could there be dragons here? If we proposed that one pair of feet had evolved into wings instead, we would end up having to classify them along with six-legged creatures like insects.

"I feel like we and Brooke understand each other fairly well, but I wonder if that's just my misperception," I said.

There were still plenty of things I didn't quite get about his facial expressions and speech, but he was a hard worker and didn't seem at all like a bad guy. He and some warrior friends of his had even helped me out of a very tight spot not long ago.

Since we were all living in the same house together, I thought it would be nice if we could all get along as well as we were able.

Then, however, I felt Minori-san's hand on my shoulder. "Shinichi-kun," she said, "I understand. If you truly intend to walk down that difficult path —heh heh heh! I'll give you all the help I can."

"Um... What are you talking about?"

This sounded bad.

Minori-san, her eyes shining behind her glasses, exclaimed, "I'll do everything in my power to help write the Shinichi/Brooke story!"

"Whoa, just hang on, now..."

"Say, Shinichi-kun, do you prefer to be the bottom?"

"Don't you ever think about anything else?!"

"Never!"

"Oh my God, you actually said it!"

I felt like Minori-san had gotten a little less restrained in her behavior recently. Since we knew she was a fujoshi anyway, maybe she'd decided to lean into it...

"How can a guy and a girl so totally fail to understand each other... Even when we're both human?" I sighed.

A man and a woman. Two people from different countries. Two people from different planets. And here, people from different races. It would be best if we could all understand each other—but maybe complete mutual comprehension was just too much to hope for.

God knows it wasn't happening here.

The Holy Eldant Empire—that was the country the Japanese government had made first contact with after discovering this parallel world. And the name wasn't just for show: this was an honest-to-goodness totalitarian state with an empress at its head.

What about the name Eldant? It didn't just refer to the country. It was also the empress's family name... as well as the name of the castle she lived in, smack in the center of Marinos, the national capital. Personally, I found the whole nomenclature kind of overcomplicated, or least confusing. As a matter of practice, though, people rarely addressed the empress by the name "Eldant." Instead they called her "empress" or "Your Majesty." I guess it's not so different from how God doesn't have a name in the monotheistic religions on Earth.

There was only one empress around, so referring to her with a common noun wasn't a problem, I supposed. When the word "Eldant" did occur in daily life, it was usually to differentiate this country from others—in which case people usually said "the Holy Eldant Empire"—or to refer to the ruler's place of residence, in which case one would say "Holy Eldant Castle." Then again, a lot of people just referred to "the imperial castle."

Anyway.

"Some things never change," I murmured as I walked through the halls of Holy Eldant Castle.

Architecturally, this castle resembled something out of the European Middle Ages, but the scale and construction were unlike anything I'd ever seen. We often describe big buildings as being "the size of a mountain," but in the case of this castle, it was probably literally true. When I stood outside my mansion and looked in its direction, the castle rose up against the horizon like a feature of the terrain. Like an actual mountain peak.

I was just wondering how they had ever built such a gigantic structure when—

"What never changes?" Minori-san asked. She was walking just behind and beside me.

“Oh. Just the way this place overwhelms you.”

“It sure does, doesn’t it?” I didn’t have to look back to know that Minori-san had a wry smile on her face. We had visited this castle dozens of times, and yet we still knew only the smallest corner of it, maybe not even a tenth of the entire building. You could probably have fit a fair-sized town in the space consumed by this place.

“And when I noticed this floor for the first time,” I said. “Man, talk about the shivers.”

I looked down at my feet. The floor was made of beautifully polished marble, but despite slight variations in color and pattern, no matter how hard you looked, you couldn’t see any seams. At first, I hadn’t understood the import of that—it hadn’t even really registered with me that the seams were missing.

“Yeah,” Minori-san said. “To think, this whole place is made out of a single piece of stone.”

Yep.

Believe it or not, Holy Eldant Castle wasn’t made of bricks or stones piled on top of each other. They took a single humongous mountain and carved the castle out of it. This place wasn’t “as big as a mountain.” It actually *was* a mountain.

Of course there were no seams in the floor. It was all of a piece.

Obviously, this wasn’t work you could do with axes and shovels. You probably couldn’t build this place in a thousand years that way.

Magic was the key.

The Holy Eldant Empire, you see, was home to wizards, some of whom were accomplished in the civil-engineering magics. It was their powers that had carved this castle from a mountain. The building looked like it could stand forever, as indeed it adorned the country’s capital even now.

Now, when I talk about stone architecture, you might think of someone who lives in a cave, or maybe those mountain temples in Tibet. This place, however, looked a lot like a Middle Ages European castle. That was why I had remained oblivious to the construction method (such as it was) for so long.

“Every time we come here, it’s like... I feel like I’m going to meet the VI-est of VIPs. It’s pretty intimidating.”

As General Manager of Amutech, I made periodic visits to Holy Eldant

Castle. The mansion I was living in was officially owned by Amutech, but we were actually borrowing it from the Holy Eldant Empire—from the empress herself, as a matter of fact. Actually, the Eldant Empire had fronted part of the capital for Amutech, which was technically a part-public/part-private enterprise. That meant the empress of the Holy Eldant Empire was, in a manner of speaking, my employer.

Hence, I was obliged to provide her with occasional updates on how business was going. Every time I showed up at the castle, though, I was seized by a sort of anxiety, a feeling that maybe I wasn't quite the right guy for the job. Or maybe more like simple disbelief that I—me!—was going to talk directly to an empress.

She had godlike powers, almost literally. This castle represented just a fraction of her authority. It would be weirder *not* to be a little ill at ease walking through it.

"As scared as you act in the hallway, you always seem pretty cool when we're actually talking to Her Majesty," Minori-san said.

"Yeah, well... I guess," I said with a bit of a grin.

At last, we rounded a corner of the hall and—

"Ah, you made it."

At the end of the corridor (way, *way* at the end of the corridor) stood a man with a knight to either side of him. At first glance, he looked like a salaryman in the most dead-end job imaginable: the neatly parted, salt-and-pepper hair; the narrow, perpetually almost-smiling eyes; and the whole kind of melancholy bureaucrat look. But this was one book you couldn't judge by its cover.

It was possible the man's entire appearance was an act, concocted to meet the needs of his current position. He was certainly capable of that.

He was Matoba Jinzaburou, chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, a governmental organization. Practically speaking, however, he was the government's man on the ground when it came to interacting with this alternate world; he took care of red tape for Amutech, requisitioned any resources we needed, and handled a variety of other niggling but necessary jobs.

That effectively made him my coworker. But was he my friend? That's a little harder to say. The government and I disagreed, after all, about what exactly we were doing in the name of "cultural exchange" here in the Holy

Eldant Empire. Disagreed so vehemently, in fact, that they had sent a special ops squad to try to kill me.

And Matoba-san, of course, was more or less on their side. That meant it would be dangerous to trust him completely. I grant that, unlike the high-level politicians and bureaucrats I knew of, Matoba-san had said and done some things that suggested a measure of fondness for me. He wasn't exactly putting me ahead of his bosses; I suspected he just thought that this was the way to make the fewest waves.

But whatever the case, while I couldn't put my complete faith in him, that didn't necessarily mean I had to view him as an enemy, either. It was, as they say, complicated. It also meant that talking with him could be a tiring affair.

"Oh, you're back?" I said as we approached him.

Matoba-san had briefly left this world to return to the one I had come from—that was to say, Japan. When the special ops team sent to eliminate me (on the grounds that I had "gone rogue") failed in their mission, Matoba-san went back with them to make a full report and settle things in Japan.

It's worth pointing out that the Eldant Empire was also aware of this special forces operation, as well as what the Japanese government had really been planning. That meant that the two knights with Matoba-san, who appeared to be protecting him at first glance, were probably there to keep an eye on him. The Empire's response when they had found out about Matoba-san's true work had actually been pretty measured; they could easily have grabbed him and thrown him in jail. The revelations could have led to the collapse of international relations and even an all-out war.

Granted, all-out war might be a little difficult through a hyperspace tunnel so narrow you couldn't fit a car through it.

"Well, be things as they may, I am the contact point for this project," Matoba-san said with a grim smile.

When Minori-san and I caught up to him, he started walking along. He and his guards kept about a half-step behind us. Our footsteps trailed us, echoing off the hard stone of the hallway.

"Ahem. On the subject of the disposition of the Japanese government," Matoba-san said, as if he had just remembered it.

Here it came. I mentally shrank back. This was the million-dollar

question.

The bigwigs back home, the politicians and everyone, had already tried to have me killed once. It was well known that they didn't change their minds easily. I guess it's not just politicians and bureaucrats—lots of people who hit forty or fifty years old are taken with a strange kind of self-confidence that makes it hard to admit when they're wrong. It leads some people to irrationality and extremism in the attempt to defend their views.

The point was, I hardly expected them to humbly apologize at this late date.

"For the time being, the government has decided to acquiesce to your fit of pique."

"Gee, I'm so happy I could cry," I said, laying on the spite. Sure, they were happy to go along with it—after they had failed in assassinating me.

But then Matoba-san went on, "As a matter of fact, your efforts here are rather highly regarded. Although they have yet to produce concrete profit, the goodwill you've created amongst the populace has its own value. I admit that the very regrettable misunderstanding of earlier did result in some tension between our nation and the Holy Eldant Empire, but—" Matoba-san glanced at the knights just behind him. "We cannot ignore the distinct possibility that your work here may, in the future, produce significant profits for Japan. Such was my superiors' decision."

".....Meaning?"

"If things continue this way and we procure a good means of trade, every export Japan creates could find an entire nation's worth of new consumers. Domestic demand could double."

"Yeah, I guess so."

You didn't have to impose unequal treaties or deliberately swindle people to make plenty of money on commerce. And in me, the government already had a pipeline to the Eldant Empire. Most likely, they figured getting rid of me at this point wasn't the smartest play.

After all, like I mentioned earlier, the Eldant Empire already knew all about what Japan was up to. If I were to disappear, the Empire's mistrust of Japan would certainly grow, and that might well make exchange impossible. It would definitely make the whole situation a lot hairier, if nothing else.

"What you're saying is that for the moment, I don't have to consider

myself in immediate danger of my life, is that right?" Still feeling the sarcasm roil within me, I deliberately used the most bureaucratic language I could come up with.

Matoba-san paused thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Well, not that I think they're to be trusted," and shrugged. "The prior assassination attempt went forward without the unanimous consent of the government. And we did just get another new prime minister."

"Great..." I muttered.

True, Japan had long been a country that was ready to change prime ministers at the drop of hat.

"This was not some mere hot-mic gaffe or campaign-finance irregularity. It was too big to be papered over. The prime minister who signed off on having you killed is no longer part of the government."

"So I'm supposed to treat it as water under the bridge?"

"More or less, yes," Matoba-san said.

How totally ridiculous—and totally bureaucratic. "We changed the guy in charge, so everything's different now! Let's just pretend none of this ever happened, okay?" I wouldn't be surprised if they wound up creating an Office of Taking Sole Responsibility for Wrongdoing. We could call the guy "Scapegoat" for short.

"Aren't you embarrassed?"

"I should say so," Matoba-san said, but his smile got even wry-er. "Regardless, this does represent an unprecedented degree of accommodation to an individual on the part of the government. I presume due punishment is being meted out internally. You can rebuff them, of course, but in that case the budget won't be passed, and it won't be possible to requisition new anime, manga, games, and light novels."

"So that's how it's gonna be."

You might be wondering what this was all about. Well, the manga and anime and games and light novels I was bringing into the Holy Eldant Empire were all being provided by the Japanese government. Given that it was the Japanese government that controlled the hyperspace tunnel representing the one route for exchange between the two countries, that made a certain amount of sense.

The government also fronted the cash to purchase all these otaku goods, which were (natch) made in Japan.

“I suppose this is what we should have done from the beginning. Using budgetary constraints to keep people’s hands tied is Politics 101.”

I couldn’t believe he could say that with such a straight face when he was talking directly to the person whose hands were being tied.

“Bear in mind that the prime minister at the time of all that unpleasantness was... rather hawkish, you might say. He liked to use force. Which, sadly, eventually led to the attempt on your life.”

“How the hell does a guy like that get into the prime minister’s office?”

For that matter, how the hell did a guy like that get into *politics*?

“It was the people who chose him, remember. He was quite popular. The things he said and did were very radical.”

I didn’t say anything. I mean, he was right, unfortunately. People who are careful to toe the line never get as much attention as the ones who say and do things that are memorable, even if those things are a little outrageous. Everyone tells themselves, “Well, what we’ve been doing hasn’t worked, so why not?”

Anyway, forget about that.

What it came down to was, I had no choice but to accept the government’s proposal. If I couldn’t keep this situation stable, there’d be no hope.

“Right, then.”

As I was contemplating this, we arrived at the audience chamber.

Holy Eldant Castle had several different audience chambers; we were at the smallest one. It was a useful little room—good for personal meetings with the empress, when you didn’t want too many nobles or imperial staff members to hear what you were saying.

In the big, official audience chamber, every time anyone came in, the knights by the door would bellow out their name and order of business, but in this smaller room such pomp and ceremony wasn’t observed. The knights on guard gave us the once over and then nodded silently before opening the door and ushering us through.

I stepped onto the red carpet that ran down the center of the room. I said this was the small audience chamber, but it was still probably about twenty mats in size.

“We are glad you’ve come, Shinichi.”

At the far end, up on a dais, sat the throne, and upon the throne sat the

empress.

The confidence and authority in her words should have been intimidating, but I felt like grinning. That was because I knew what her personality was like—and above all, what she looked like.

"Ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire" seems like a pretty darned impressive title, but the person who stared down at me from the throne—

"Your Majesty, I am overjoyed to see you in good health and high spirits this day."

"Oh, stop that."

—was a little girl.

Not that I would ever say that to her face. It would totally tick her off.

Petralka an Eldant III. She appeared to be hardly into her teens; in fact, it wouldn't be all that hard to picture her with a backpack, heading off to elementary school. But she was the absolute monarch of this country.

That didn't prevent her from also being pretty much the perfect loli character. Her silver hair and emerald eyes were practically a form of jewelry in and of themselves; she was utterly beautiful and you just wanted to put her in a glass case for safekeeping. I'm proud to say that I'm capable of getting moe over just about anything from a loli girl to a big-sister type, so whether you considered her an "archetypical little girl character" or something else, the point was, I found her very attractive.

"Why do you stand on formality? Are you upset?"

"Well, I'm meeting an empress. It's a pretty formal occasion."

"Did we not give you permission to call us by our name?"

"Well, uh, yes, you did."

It was only then that it dawned on me: this was something that Her Majesty—or rather, Petralka—was doing specifically to nettle Matoba-san, or perhaps to control him. Pointedly showing that I was in her good graces was also a warning to him of what might happen if he and his friends tried to do anything to me again. That was the Empress of Eldant for you: she might look like jailbait, but you couldn't take her lightly.

I guessed this would be a good moment for me to play along.

"Okay, then, Petralka," I said in my friendliest tone. "Let's read plenty of manga together next time we get a chance, just the two of us."

"Wha?!" Petralka's eyes went wide and she stiffened.

Huh? Did I say something wrong?

“Ahh. We see now.” She collected herself, then nodded as if considering. “Shinichi.”

“Huh? Yes?”

“We are somewhat surprised to hear such an idea from your own lips.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, you are?”

I thought we were acting super friendly to put the pressure on Matoba-san. No?

At the same time, this loli-ish empress was a bit like an instant water heater. If I said the wrong thing, I could find myself in a lot of trouble very quickly. I doubted she would have me executed or anything, but she packed a mean punch despite her small size. I could say from experience that when she hit you, it hurt.

Hence my resolve to tread lightly.

“Ahem. A-At any rate,” Petralka said in a somewhat strained voice, “we shall endeavor to, erm, clear some time in our schedule and... Yes, that’s it. We shall have a special villa readied for the purpose.”

“Er... Right.”

That seemed like a pretty serious thing to say, actually. I mean, a special villa? She wasn’t really going to build a whole satellite palace just to read manga with me, right? I didn’t think she had to go that far to make the point to Matoba-san.

I guess absolute rulers have a different perspective on money than the rest of us, though. Here I thought we were just joking, but there was always the chance that she would actually build a palace. It was sort of like if someone said “I’ll give you your allowance,” and you held out your hands only to have them drop a huge sack of money into them.

“Uh, be that as it may, Petralka, my report...”

“Erm, yes. Your report.”

Huh? What was with the disappointed look? Not that it wasn’t awfully cute on Petralka’s face.

“Things at the school are... Ahem. I’d like to say they’re going well, but...”

The “school” I was referring to was the place where we were teaching people everything they’d need to enjoy otaku culture (manga, novels, anime, and so forth), like Japanese language and the cultural knowledge to go with it. I had asked Petralka to build it for me, but as a matter of fact it

was the first public educational institution in the Eldant Empire. And so, much like how Petralka was simply “the empress,” everyone knew that “the school” referred to my otaku training center.

That school, it so happened, was immensely popular. I wanted as many people as possible to be able to enjoy otaku culture, so I did away with exacting entrance standards; Amutech was even footing tuition. But that turned out to be a bad idea. Fueled by rumors that the empress had a special place in her heart for this project, everyone from commoner to noble was champing at the bit to get in.

Our initial plan had been to have about fifty students, but we received twenty times that many applicants, a thousand people. Obviously we couldn’t take them all, and so as much as it hurt me, we started out by limiting admittance to the children of the nobility, along with some of the more well-to-do commoners. Families with influence, you might say. That was how we picked our fifty pupils.

Despite this, however, we still suffered from a dearth of teachers—specifically, the instructional staff consisted of me and Minori-san.

“What is it? Is there some problem?”

“We just don’t have enough staff. I mean ever, for anything.”

We were somehow getting by for the time being, but I eventually wanted the school to be able to live by a creed of accepting all who would come and not trying to detain anyone who wanted to leave. If you try to force culture on people, it all too easily becomes a weapon of invasion. That was why I wanted attending or not attending my school to be entirely the free choice of the students.

But that in turn meant that we needed to accept everyone who applied, and I didn’t have the slightest clue how we were going to deal with twenty times our current number of students. It was possible that we could take our cue from some university classes: just have all the students in one giant room and have a teacher lecture at them, knowledge flowing unilaterally from us to them. Even at that, though, two instructors was obviously not enough.

“One idea is to separate the students into class years and have the higher-level students, like Myusel, teach the beginners.”

Whether it be manga, anime, novels, or games, first you had to learn a minimum of Japanese writing. There were some students who were already

so advanced that they were translating light novels from the Japanese; we could take them on as instructors in the more basic classes to rectify our chronic shortage of personnel.

Petralka, however, looked surprised. “Have Myusel do it?”

“Uh... No go?”

Myusel was nominally my maid, but strictly speaking, the Holy Eldant Empire itself was her employer—in other words, Petralka was her boss. If she vetoed the idea of Myusel teaching, we could never go forward with it.

“We are not necessarily saying you can’t do it,” Petralka said, but she seemed unusually hesitant to speak her mind.

I went on, “But I am concerned that if Myusel’s time is taken up with teaching, she won’t be able to attend to housework. I’d love to get another maid to pick up the slack...”

This was definitely something I had to ask Petralka to handle for us. True, it was possible Amutech itself could hire a housekeeper, but bringing someone over from Earth seemed like potentially a lot of hassle, and as far as finding someone around here, letting the Empire do the hiring seemed a lot safer in terms of checking candidates’ backgrounds and so on.

“Shinichi.”

“Yes?”

“Is this not essentially a request to increase the number of women around you?” Petralka was looking squarely at me.

“Huh? Uh—no! That was definitely not what I had in mind!” I said, shaking my head vigorously.

Now that I thought about it, living with me at the mansion were Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san—three eligible young women. Of course, there was another guy there (Brooke), but he was a lizardman and, as groundskeeper, spent most of his time outside. His totally inhuman appearance, combined with the relative infrequency with which he was inside the house... Well, I could understand where it might leave the impression that I had something of a harem going.

“And?” Petralka asked, drumming her fingers on the armrest of her throne. “Are you hoping for another large-chested helper?” Her gaze was so cold she could have been shooting freeze rays out of her eyes.

“Whaddaya mean, another?! I told you that was all a big misunderstanding, can’t you let it go already?!” I all but shouted.

It seemed like Petralka had pigeonholed me as having a big-boob fixation. And sure, I had nothing against a great rack, but I liked small ones, too! Take Petralka herself, for instance. She had this perfect little swell, noticeable but not overwhelming, like it would fit right in the palm of your hand... But if I let any of *that* out of my mouth, there was a distinct chance of my head winding up on the chopping block.

"As long as we get someone to help Myusel around the house, it doesn't matter who they are."

"Hmm. But if Myusel starts going to the school..."

"Something the matter with that?"

"It would mean the two of you would be together practically morning, noon, and night."

It looked like this was a topic of considerable reflection for her, but as far as I was concerned, I would be perfectly happy to be with Myusel all the time, and I didn't see what particular problems it could pose for Petralka. Or was there some nuance to this situation that I wasn't noticing?

"Petralka?"

"Oh—no. It's nothing." She shook her head a bit too emphatically.

Seriously, what's going on?

"At any rate, very well. We will consider your petition for a maid. Finding someone suitable for a position like this can take a surprisingly long time, though..."

"Thank you for your help," I said earnestly, bowing.

"Is there anything else?"

"Uh, this and that," I said with a sigh.

We were getting more pupils—that was a good thing as far as it went. Directly or indirectly, more and more people were becoming interested in otaku culture, and since we were teaching reading and writing as well, it meant the cultural level of the whole Eldant Empire would go up. But also...

"If we get dozens of times more students than we have now... I have to worry that the fighting will get worse, too."

"Fighting?"

"Sometimes people of different races just don't seem to get along..."

I thought back to the commotion at the school the other day.

Bam! A fist slammed down on a desk. Everyone looked in the direction of the sound. A short girl and a taller guy were standing there, absolutely staring daggers at each other. The girl was a dwarf, and the boy was an elf.

If you were wondering, it was the dwarf who had pounded her fist on the desk. She left a dent a centimeter deep in the wood surface. Dwarves were inevitably short, and the girls in particular had cherubic faces, so it was easy to think of them like children—but they were also fearsomely strong, and if you figured "they're just shrimp" or "they're just kids," you could be in for a world of hurt. I had seen a unit of JSDF special-ops forces, the elite of the elite, get beaten down by dwarf women who weren't carrying any weapons at all.

In the JSDF's defense, the troopers probably saw the dwarves as being women and children (possibly both at once), and so didn't fight with their full strength. The soldiers had also been hit with magic, and their opponents' short size made them hard to fight anyway. No matter how well-trained they were, the soldiers had probably never imagined they might have to fight enemies who were barely 1.5 meters tall.

"Just you say that again!"

"Gladly! How many times do you want to hear it?" The elf looked down on the dwarf—I mean literally, being the better part of fifty centimeters taller than she was—and snorted. "How can you imagine that Ko**tsu and Bar**by are all lovey-dovey?! That's ridiculous! Why do you so enjoy forcing everyone into homosexual relationships? You disgusting dwarf. Does it ultimately come from all the time you spend around dirt? That's what I said."

Not to be outdone, the dwarf replied, "Awfully big talk from someone without the muscle to back it up! I've heard you! 'Ka*de-chan is my wife!' 'Blue **se-chan is so moe!' You ought to be embarrassed! What kind of moron are you?"

A volume of some manga or other was sitting on the table between them. When I saw the title, I realized it was the manga version of a particular anime. The DVD must have been available in the library, which we had set up so people could watch videos. It looked like they were having

some sort of argument about the characters from the manga...

“Embarrassed? What do I have to be embarrassed about? Moe is culture! Ultimately, it—”

“Ultimately! Ultimately! Do you think you get to stop thinking because you know what everything ‘ultimately’ is? Now I know why elves are so light—you don’t have a brain to weigh you down!”

“Better than a head full of rocks, like dwarves have!”

They were really going at it, trading a parade of insults that would make your toes curl.

I had pretty much grasped what was going on, though. The dwarf was putting a yaoi spin on this manga, and the elf was making fun of her for it.

“Sigh...” I knew from personal experience that what girls and guys wanted out of a given otaku work was sometimes very different. But unlike most manga and novels, anime often wasn’t separated by “label,” so men and women frequently found themselves consuming the same works together, but each interpreting and enjoying it in light of their own preferences.

It was only natural that guys and girls would get moe for different things. The elf and the dwarf were supposedly talking about the same series, but since each of them was coming at it from the direction of what they liked best, they ended up talking past each other—as was all too obvious from listening to them.

Under normal circumstances, such differences in preference generally weren’t inflicted on each other. Take Comiket, for example. Genre distinctions are made both spatially and temporally, and usually people with opposing interests never see each other. Booths selling doujinshi aimed at women and those selling doujinshi aimed at men don’t share the same space, even if their books are based on the same anime.

That’s what’s typical, mind you. Very few people deliberately seek out those with different preferences and try to argue. Otaku usually prefer to just ignore people who can’t understand them. For better or for worse, otaku know how to handle other otaku. The culture emerged organically.

That kind of “common sense,” however, couldn’t be counted on at this school. The Holy Eldant Empire had never had much in the way of “entertainment culture,” and the liberal infusion of manga and anime and games and light novels we had brought over produced a sort of

overreaction, like a medicine that was *too* effective. They didn't know how to distance themselves from people whose interests diverged from theirs.

And on top of that...

"Elves! Hmph! Who needs 'em?"

"Dwarves! What boors!"

Elves and dwarves had never been the best of friends; add a disagreement about media to the mix and you had a recipe for some truly stupendous arguments. They were often looking for an excuse to fight anyway, and belittling each other's interests proved an excellent way to bait their opponents.

"Hey! If you think I'm going to let that pass, you've got another thing coming!"

"I don't think you think at all!"

"Try me, you acorn-shaped—!"

"All that time in the trees must have set moss growing in those giant ears!"

"All that underground sulfur must have rotted your brain!"

And considering that the otaku work in question was nothing more than the spark, these arguments inevitably devolved into a series of mean remarks about the other race's appearance, abilities, or history. Anyone of the same race who was present was obviously not going to let those kinds of barbs slide. Pretty soon, what began as a personal dispute between an elf boy and a dwarf girl had turned into an entire classroom of people squaring off, elves versus dwarves.

"Heh! It's hardly worth talking to you!" the elf crowed.

"Oh, that's right," the dwarf shot back. "Run away! You're the worst."

"Ex*cuse* me? As if you don't just prattle on without even hearing what I'm saying!"

I knew from personal experience that these sorts of arguments never really end. Usually someone just says something like "You're wrong!" or "You're so dumb it's not even worth talking to you," ignoring any kind of rational argument, to say nothing of the other person's viewpoint. That's how it works online, for sure. But since differences of interpretation and preference for any given otaku work were just an excuse to start fighting, it ends up not really being a question of who's right and who's wrong.

When it comes to stuff like anime, you'd think you could just enjoy it

however you liked. But people start talking about how it "should be," and then things go off the rails—because with a million ways to enjoy any given work, no one conclusion is going to please everyone.

And that was why—

"Unforgivable!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth!"

The elf and dwarf both took up fighting stances and began to chant magic.

"*Emarufe Ekansu!* Flaming Serpent!"

"*Erifutoshigeru Tosegunotosu!* Fire with fire!"

The coil of flame that the elf shot out wrapped itself around the dwarf like a snake, just as the name suggested. But the dwarf, being a dwarf, had cast a spell of resistance to fire, and the conflagration stopped a hair's breadth from her skin, doing no damage.

Incidentally, elves tended to be more skilled at offensive magic, while dwarves often specialized in defensive spells. I just learned that myself.

"*Gunoru Edirutosu!* Thousand-foot Lunge!"

"*Tifu Murottsu!* Storm Fist!"

There was a tremendous bang as the dwarf girl dropped into a shoulder tackle and the elf boy jumped back and fired off a spell in return. Before the dwarf could connect with her target, a whirlwind spun up and slowed her down.

Maybe the two of them weren't all that powerful, or maybe they had both held back at the last instant so there wouldn't be any casualties, because neither of them appeared to be injured, but the power of their magic had thrown little sparks at every corner of the classroom.

"Yikes, that's hot! Watch what you're doing, you long-eared loon!"

"Yowch! What's wrong with you demi-humans?!"

The shouting came from people who had been hurt when the dwarf, still wrapped in the coil of flame, came flying toward them.

The room erupted. Yelling and shouting and arguing spread all over. Racial discrimination is bad enough on its own, but when it's inspired by a dispute about 801 (that is, yaoi) and moe, that just adds an extra savor of the pathetic. And Professor Tolkien would spin in his grave to see a moe-obsessed elf and a 801-mad dwarf.

The shouting and the stomping and the smashing all ran together. Fire

and electric shocks and impacts and pieces of things flew everywhere. The classroom suddenly seemed to have turned into a literal battlefield.

"Ahem." Minori-san, standing beside me at the lectern, was giving me the eye. "Aren't you going to do something about this?"

"Do I look like I have a death wish?"

I wanted to have a proper lesson as much as anybody. Besides, it's not like I enjoyed watching people fight or seeing my classroom supplies get annihilated. Seeing figures destroyed, even if they were mass-produced ones, hurt my heart, and my spirit ached at the waste of manga and novels torn to shreds.

If I just jumped in, though, I could only get hurt, as I had already learned from painful experience. I could try shouting, but who was going to listen to me? Everyone was too worked up about the "enemy" in front of them. The classroom was utterly out of my control, and I didn't feel like there was anything I could do about it.

"I guess we've got no choice, then," Minori-san said with a sigh.

What came next happened in a flash.

Or rather, a bang.

In an enclosed space, even a 9mm is plenty deafening. Elves, dwarves, and humans all froze in place, then turned toward us. They weren't looking at me. They were looking at Minori-san, who was holding her JSDF-issue 9mm handgun above her head. Without really thinking about it, I glanced up at the ceiling, but I didn't see any sign of a bullet. Maybe she had loaded it with blanks.

She still got what she wanted, though.

"Listen up, you stupid students!" Minori-san put both her hands on the teacher's desk. When someone who was normally as laid-back as she was started shouting like this, it definitely got people's attention. She glared at everyone from behind her glasses. "There is no racial bigotry here!" If this had been a comic book, her words would have been accompanied by some sound effect like *don!* (bam!)

Wow. That's a WAC for you. She sure knew how to lay down the law when it counted. So cool!

"I don't look down on any of you pigs, whether you're elf-pigs, dwarf-pigs, or human-pigs!"

I take back my "So cool."

Um... Minori-san? What's with this "pig" talk?

"Here you are all equally worthless!"

"Just a—"

"My orders! Are to weed out all non-hackers! Who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved Corps! Do you maggots understand that?"

Y'all remember yer in the Ground force and not the Marines, right?

Wait, was I so startled that I had started speaking with a drawl?

No! What I meant was, where'd this Sergeant Hartman act come from?!

"Stop! Walk it back, Minori-san, walk it back!" I waved frantically at her, terrified that she would start blurting out "I didn't know they stacked s@&! that high" or "slimy communist c&#ks*@!ers" and other truly unprintable things.

"Aww, but I was just getting into it." She looked genuinely disappointed.

What is wrong *with her?*

"You're gonna get yourself killed by Gomer Pyle."

"There are no M14s around, so I'm not worried."

"Yeah, well I *do* want a teenage queen."

And on and on we went, in a conversation that would probably have made zero sense to anyone who hadn't seen *F*** Metal Jacket*.

Finally, I glanced at the students. "Er, uh, anyway, no fighting in the classroom, okay?"

"Sir yes sir!" they shouted in unison. Funny. They sounded just like a group of spooked recruits.

These people had all been raised in a very authoritarian society, so sometimes Minori-san's top-down style of leadership (by which I mean shouting things at them) seemed to click better for them.

Having said that, if you think that, having laid down the law once, we never had another problem with fighting... Well, you'd be wrong. We could shout ourselves hoarse, but the effect was only ever temporary. We were talking about rivalries that had been going on for centuries here; that hostility wasn't going to vanish overnight.

Faced with a classroom atmosphere just as strained as ever, I muttered, “What are we gonna do...?”

Okay, flashback over.

The point is, the classroom constantly seemed to be on the verge of exploding. The spark that set it off could be anything. I happened to pick an example that started with a disagreement about how to interpret certain anime characters, but that was sort of the best you could hope for. Sometimes arguments started over whether it was better for the heroine to have big boobs or to be *really* young, and once an elf and a dwarf came to blows over whether this actress or that one should have played such-and-such a role in an anime adaptation of a certain manga. Naturally, what started as an innocent dispute about media somehow escalated into a series of “Yo’ momma so fat”-type insults.

“Getting everyone to settle down is a massive pain,” I griped.

But Petralka replied, “Well, we suppose there’s nothing to be done.”

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“The enmity between elves and dwarves is long-standing.”

“I guess you’re right about that,” I sighed.

I know the differences between races can be pretty noticeable, I thought, picturing Brooke or the way Elvia had acted that morning. Even if you didn’t set out to be discriminatory, when another person’s bodily construction and biology were so distinct, it was all too easy to start thinking of them as though they were a different form of life. The divergence in worldview that sometimes came from those differences could cause friction, and it was almost impossible to eliminate these fundamental differences. I didn’t understand Brooke’s experience as a lizardman, and he probably didn’t understand mine as a human.

Even two people from the same race might fail to understand each other if their perspectives were too different. So maybe some strife between humans and demi-humans, or between different races of demi-humans, was only natural.

“I’ve got to admit, I hoped we might be able to let lizardman children

into the school at some point," I said, more to myself than anyone else.

"Lizardman children?" The dubious inquiry came not from Petralka, but from the handsome knight standing at her shoulder.

We sometimes talk about "knights in shining armor," but this guy almost seemed to literally embody the expression. Much of the simple armor he wore, as well as the outfit underneath it, was a pure white. He had shimmering silver hair, just like Petralka, and he let it grow long. He was pretty much a stereotypical anime- or manga-style pretty-boy.

This was the noble Garius en Cordobal. He was a knight of the Holy Eldant Empire, as well as a minister, and on top of that he was a relative of Petralka's. In other words, he was second in importance only to Petralka herself.

"What exactly would be the purpose of admitting lizardmen to the school, Shinichi?" he asked, sounding almost annoyed.

"The purpose? I... I just thought they would be happy to get the chance at an education like everyone else. Lizardmen face even more discrimination than elves and dwarves, right?"

Petralka cocked her head. "Dis-crim-i-na-tion?"

Oops. It happened again.

Sometimes, words that seemed simple enough to me didn't quite get across. It might be that my Eldant audience didn't have the right concept, or that they took slightly the wrong nuance from it. Our oh-so-convenient rings readily got across the meaning of most of our words, but when the other person lacked any concept equivalent to what you were saying, the word would be communicated to them as pure sound, with no equivalent meaning.

"Oh, uh, in other words, something that's not equal, or, like, when someone is persecuted or treated as less important by others. I thought it might be nice if we could eliminate some of that, even if only at school—"

"Ridiculous." Garius's response startled me. "I want you to understand something, Shinichi. Those *things* may walk like people do and talk like people do, but deep down they are beasts. No—perhaps not even that."

"Gosh, you... you really don't like lizardmen, do you?" I frowned.

"I feel I should say that this is not simply my personal opinion," Garius replied. "Lizardmen as a species are cold-blooded, and their humors are less intense than those of humans."

“Is... Is that right?” I asked. And truth be told, I could almost see where Garius was coming from. As I had noticed that morning, Brooke sometimes seemed less prone to strong emotion than a human. Like how when he got hit, he didn’t seem to get angry—in fact, he didn’t even seem to think of it as sad or disappointing or particularly unpleasant. He felt pain less acutely than we did, so maybe the emotions associated with pain or unpleasantness were absent or less emphatic.

“Trying to treat them the same way as humans could simply create new problems. It could easily lead to the very ‘discrimination’ you’re worried about,” Garius said.

I thought I understood what he meant. If we treated lizardmen the same way we did other humanoid races, it might actually invite scorn from those peoples. I guess even in contemporary Japan people sometimes argue that if you give too many breaks to those who have been discriminated against, you end up actually treating them better than the people who weren’t discriminated against, creating a new kind of inequality.

“Okay,” I said, “but if we can turn the lizardmen into customers, we could start selling otaku stuff to them. It would be, whaddaya call it, a new market.”

Granted the differences in perception and worldview that I mentioned, I wasn’t actually sure whether lizardmen would be receptive to works of otaku culture or not. Brooke, at least, sometimes watched anime or read manga, although that was partly because I encouraged him to. Myusel said that every once in a while he would ask her about the meaning of a word he found in a manga. So that meant he was at least interested, right?

“I had another thought,” I added. “Lizardmen are effectively the lowest class in this country, right? If we want to raise the nation’s overall cultural level, pulling it up from the top is one way to do it, but raising the bottom seems more efficient.”

If we taught the lizardmen, who were considered the bottom of the heap around here, to read and write, if they were able to become bearers of culture, then the higher classes would be embarrassed if they themselves were illiterate. That was my thought, anyway. Then people would actively take it upon themselves to study and learn, and achieving the necessary educational level for the spread of culture would be easier.

“Hmm...” Garius didn’t look quite convinced. He seemed to be

considering what I had said.

As nonchalantly as this guy could make racist pronouncements, he wasn't actually malicious, nor—most striking of all—was he inextricably attached to these viewpoints. What I mean is, if he saw that it was of real benefit *not* to discriminate, he had the flexibility and vision to change his view.

I had real respect for Garius that way. (Let me be clear: definitely *not* of the "You're so amazing! Take me now!" variety.) It was a pretty impressive thing to be able to do, all the more so for someone in a position of power.

"It is true that from small argument comes great bloodshed," Petralka commented. "Strife between the races is something we can't afford to ignore. We are told that such discord has even caused civil wars in the past. And racial tension fuels a good deal of the issues that currently occupy the royal guard."

"All true," Garius said with a nod.

"If such problems could be decreased even slightly, would that not reduce the burden on the knights?"

The Eldant Empire didn't have what we would call a police force. All matters that required any kind of armed force, whether domestic or external, were the business of the knights. So if a war broke out, or intensified, the knights got busier, and sometimes public safety suffered as a result.

I was given to understand that the Japanese government, in addition to its scheme to import otaku culture, had also been thinking about taking over policing of the Eldant Empire, but I assumed those plans were on hold. Neither Petralka nor Garius trusted Japan nearly enough for that now.

"Given that all peoples of this empire, regardless of race, are equally our subjects, reducing the amount of fighting would surely strengthen the nation. That in itself is no bad thing." Petralka frowned and went on, "But the other side of that coin is the emergence of groups like Bedouna."

"Right," I said dispiritedly.

Bedouna was an extremist group that referred to themselves as the "assembly of patriots." At one point, Petralka, Minori-san, Myusel, and I had all been their hostages. They regarded racial discrimination as a part of the country's culture and were intent on killing me, whom they regarded as an invader who wanted to undermine that culture.

"As ruler, we may tell people not to 'discriminate,'" Petralka said, "but

there may be those who do not understand, as well as those who actively oppose us."

"True enough," I said. Racial discrimination was a fraught issue even in my own world. I knew I was hardly going to come up with anything that would eliminate it overnight.

"Is there anything else?"

"Well, no big problems," I said, cocking my head and searching my memory. "I guess I could point out that I'm a little surprised by the lack of reaction to sports stories here."

I was being honest. I had decided long before that I wouldn't hide anything in my reports, good or bad. Although I hadn't known or wanted it, I had come here as the tip of the spear of an invasion. It would be in my best interests not to hide anything else.

"*Suporrrtz*?" Petralka looked confused. "What is that?"

"Oh, well, you know... How do I explain?"

Now that I had to put it into words, I found that the concept of sports was so broad I was having trouble summing it up. There were several activities in the Eldant Empire that could have been classified as sports, but they didn't exactly match up with what I had in mind. Some of them were closer to things like *kemari*, a kickball game played in Japan in the eleventh century, and others were more like the kind of hunting once enjoyed by English nobles. That sort of thing.

When I talked about sports, though, I was thinking of things like marathons or swimming or soccer. Rugby or baseball. All a little different from what they had here. The closest thing to swimming in the Eldant Empire was the aquatic training conducted by the royal military forces. It was similar to marathon running and the like. Even when it came to things like *kemari* or hunting, they were treated mostly as entertainment. People didn't see them as ways of training the body or keeping themselves healthy.

There especially didn't seem to be anything resembling "ball sports" in which players divided into two teams and competed against each other. That was part of why people around here tended to bounce off most sports manga.

"You know, some people say that ball sports like baseball or soccer are basically substitutes for war," Minori-san said from beside me. "Think about how violent dodgeball is, for example. Maybe a country that's

actually fighting a war doesn't have a lot of demand for substitutes."

"Sure, I could see that." I understood where she was coming from. "But still, it's too bad. They're missing out on a lot of fun."

Soccer, tennis, baseball, rugby, and lots more besides: sports manga were a long-standing genre, to say nothing of all the other works that were influenced by these games.

"It's definitely true that sports stories are hard to appreciate if you've never played a sport," Minori-san said with a nod.

That's not to say that you can't enjoy a baseball manga if you've never played baseball, but you have to at least be familiar with the premise. If you had never so much as heard of baseball before, it would make it a lot harder to understand the story. Being in an environment where you were exposed to it—via radio broadcasts of baseball games, say—helped, too.

"If you know how the game is supposed to be played, you can have a lot of fun with things that tweak it, too," I said. "Think *Shaolin So**er* or *As**o Kyuudan* or *We Ain't Got None!*"

I thought back to my father's personal library. *Samurai G***ts* was an oldie but goodie. They were forever using the high-jump trick ball or the mirror-image trick ball or the super-spin trick ball and all sorts of other weird pitches that made absolutely no sense, but that was part of the fun.

There was something to be said for stories that were totally over-the-top. Take the time when one player, hoping to counter the high-jump trick ball, practiced shooting his bat out of a bow on a cliffside...

"Those are some awfully obscure references for someone your age, aren't they?" Minori-san asked. "Wouldn't something like *Prince of Soccer* or *Inazuma E**ven* be more appropriate now?"

That's a dyed-in-the-wool fujoshi for you: she's just looking for different things in her media than I am.

"And these are interesting, you say? We are intrigued." Petralka leaned forward in her seat. When it came to enjoying otaku goods, the loli-ish empress had pretty wide-ranging tastes. That made it easy to get her on board with ideas like this, which I was thankful for.

"You want to try it?"

"Hm? Try what?"

"Japanese-style sports!" I said.

If I could get her interested in sports as a whole, it would open up a

number of options in the future.

“I admit, if we’re going to do them properly, we’ll need a baseball diamond or a soccer field or something. I’ll bet we could just use the training ground, or an empty field somewhere.”

“Hmm...” Petralka looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said, “We will consider it.”

Chapter Two: Lunatic

Japan Self-Defense Force First Garrison, deep in the Holy Eldant Empire. The front-line base for the JSDF in this brave new world.

This was a haven for the members of the Japanese military who had been sent on this most secret of secret assignments. The elite of the elite gathered here, waiting for the mission that would determine the fate of their country!

.....Yeeaaaah no.

I could act as serious as I liked, but the place really wasn't much to look at. In the corner of a plaza in the corner of a training ground in a corner of the Eldant Empire, the JSDF had constructed a temporary barracks to sleep in. They may have named it the First Garrison, but there was no Second or Third Garrison, nor did they have any intention of building any.

It was to every appearance just a slapdash temporary residence. The size of the hyperspace portal didn't permit any really big materials, so the scale of the building stayed modest. It afforded just enough space for one JSDF platoon—fewer than thirty people—to sleep in. Until a few months ago, it had been a collection of tents.

When I consider the vast gulf between where I was living and where they were living, the stark difference between Amutech, which was at least nominally a joint venture of the Japanese and Eldant governments, and the army, where the Japanese had to fend for themselves, became apparent.

"Hey, it's Shinichi-sama."

"Shinichi-sama!"

When we showed up at the training ground, the Japanese officers weren't the first to notice us and come rushing over. Instead it was the training ground's original residents—the kids who were getting ready to go into military service. They all seemed to be in their early teens; there were plenty of humans, but more than half of them were demi-humans, including even a handful of lizardmen.

For the record, they weren't yet proper soldiers, but because they were

treated as effectively members of the military, they were wearing magic rings. Hence we were all able to communicate with each other.

From the far side of the field, the JSDF soldiers looked up and waved. They were near a collection of shock-proof resin containers, all piled up. Those containers were why we had come to the First Garrison.

"Are those the trade goods from this Ja-pan of yours?" Elvia asked with interest.

Yep: those containers were transport crates filled with stuff from Japan. The containers themselves were military equipment, with unassuming exteriors, but they were sealed tight and completely impact-resistant. They could be rained on or handled a little roughly, and the cargo inside wouldn't get a scratch. Great stuff.

Trade had yet to start in earnest, but the JSDF already made regular trips between Japan and the Eldant Empire, and they also handled transporting goods from Japan over to this side of the wormhole. The current shipment went beyond the usual provisions; it was what you could call an experiment in the commerce we were about to commence. It wasn't yet completely clear what effect the hyperspace tunnel had on things that were transported over here, so these containers included some items for me and Minori-san as well as members of the garrison force.

When there were a bunch of PCs or manga or light novels or anime DVDs or games to deliver, the JSDF's armored personnel carrier would pull up at our house. When it came to things that weren't directly connected to Amutech's business, though—like personal items for me or Minori-san, or food that was hard to get in the Eldant Empire—they came with these weekly deliveries. I was here to pick up a few items I'd requested.

With me, incidentally, were Minori-san, Elvia, and Brooke. The latter two were to help me carry boxes. Maybe it seems unfair to force a girl to cart cargo around, but Elvia actually volunteered, on the grounds that if she didn't get plenty of physical exercise, there was a greater chance of her doing something crazy again.

Actually, I guess she could be trying to spy, too.

"This isn't the stuff we want to sell," I said. "More like personal items."

As I said, goods for Amutech's use would be delivered directly to us. In this case, we were just sort of piggybacking on a delivery that was mainly for the soldiers.

“Shinichi-sama, Shinichi-sama!”

“Hurry up, open it!”

The children at the training ground were insistent. Apparently, they had been waiting for me eagerly. I gathered that the JSDF troops had refused to open the containers until Minori-san and I got there, and the ever-curious kids had been on tenterhooks.

“I wonder if they’ll have rice crackers this time.”

“If they have seaweed, I’d trade them for some macha-macha berries.”

The kids sounded very excited. They saw the JSDF soldiers every day, so they weren’t intimidated by them. Every once in a while I saw a soldier hand out some sweets or a Japanese snack that they had imported. It reminded me of the way the American troops were supposed to have acted toward Japanese children after World War II.

“Come on, hurry!”

We worked our way over to the containers, the children urging us on. I bowed to the troopers posted on guard over the delivery, then made a beeline for the crate with Minori-san’s and my stuff in it. It was already unlocked, so all I had to do was open it and check that everything we had asked for was inside.

I pulled open the airtight lid with its rubber gasket and saw, inside, several cardboard boxes.

“Brooke, let’s take all these out of here and set them over there.”

“Yessir.” He came slowly forward, stuck his arms into the shipping container, and emerged with boxes of various sizes. The shipping container was pretty deep, so when we had to get boxes that were piled all the way back, Brooke with his tall height and long arms made quick work of the job.

We ended up with a collection of ten or twelve cardboard boxes, some big and some small. The system was, when I thought of something I needed, I would write it down and give it to Minori-san, who would handle the rest. It meant that I didn’t necessarily get things in the order I asked for them, so I didn’t know exactly what was in the boxes. There was only one way to find out.

Hence, I pulled the packing tape off one of the boxes and started to open it.

“Maybe you could help open the others, Elvia.”

“If you’re sure,” she said, and nodded.

This was her first experience with cardboard boxes and packing tape, and she looked very interested in getting her hands on them. She happily grabbed one of the boxes and—

Riiiiip!

"H-Hey, Elvia, what are you doing?!

"Huh...?"

She looked at me blankly. At her feet was a ruined cardboard box, its contents spilling all over the ground. I only needed her to remove the tape, but she had torn the top of the box clean off.

That's some strength...

That was a beast person for you. Guy or girl, they were strong. Especially when it was "that phase"—or maybe she misjudged her own strength.

"D-Did I do something wrong?" She sounded a little nervous.

"No, I mean—well, it's fine." It was just a cardboard box, after all. Not such a big deal if she destroyed it. I could just consider it a warning to be careful what I asked Elvia to handle during that time of the moon. She looked like she could crush a plastic figurine in one hand.

"I don't mind about the box," I said, "but there's some fragile stuff inside, so be careful, okay?"

"Very sorry about that," Elvia said with an uncomfortable laugh. She started to gather up the stuff scattered on the ground—but then suddenly, she froze.

"Elvia?" I said, but I didn't get a reaction. She had gone stiff, as if something had taken her by surprise. I followed her gaze to see—

"A ball?"

A box with pictures from some anime had come open, and a golden ball had rolled partway out. It was about the size of a soccer ball. In fact, the golden color had thrown me, but when I took a closer look, I saw the pentagon pattern—it *was* a soccer ball.

"Huh? This looks oddly familiar..."

"Oh, that's mine!" Minori-san said happily, sticking her hand in the air. "Oooh! I'm so glad they were able to get it!"

"What is it?"

“It’s limited-edition merchandise from *Prince of Soccer FINAL*!” She scooped up the ball with a victorious look on her face.

Prince of Soccer was the soccer drama for a new generation, a story about a pretty-boy soccer player with near-supernatural abilities and techniques that bordered on magic. The franchise encompassed both a manga (perfect for fujoshi) and an anime, a classic example of multi-media marketing.

But hang on. Wasn’t *FINAL* supposed to be the third season of the anime? I recalled the show doing at least as well as *I**zuma Eleven* in the annals of outrageous soccer stories. It was immensely popular, spawning not just an animated adaptation but video games and a stage musical, too. Given that it was aimed squarely at fujoshi, it fell outside my personal interests, but I knew it by reputation: its fans were notoriously rabid.

“This is a replica of the ‘golden ball’ that the hero Masato gets at the end. Okay, so they just painted a regular soccer ball gold, but as pack-ins go it’s a pretty— Huh?”

She was halfway through her sentence when she noticed that the soccer ball had disappeared from her hands. Or, not disappeared, exactly. It had been stolen at an incredible speed. But who’d done it?

“Hey, what?!”

“Elvia?”

Minori-san and I both saw Elvia, roll-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-ling around the training field with gusto, as if she were a ball herself. She must have been the one who had jumped past and taken Minori-san’s ball, and now she was clutching it to her chest, but she had been overwhelmed by her own momentum.

“What?” Minori-san said. “What the heck?”

“Yeah, seriously,” I said.

We both looked on in astonishment, as did the soldiers and the kids. Everyone at the training ground was completely taken aback, and in the blink of an eye we were all focused on the thief, Elvia. Actually, there was one person who might or might not have been surprised; I couldn’t tell. That was Brooke. But never mind that.

With a “H-Hey, give that back!” Minori-san snapped to her senses and shot off after Elvia.

The beast, however, rolled until she came to a standstill on the far edge of the training ground, where she popped to her feet and glanced back at us. Her eyes had the same berserk look they’d had when she attacked me the other day.

Welp, this was no good. She’d checked out.

For a moment, she watched Minori-san get closer and closer, and then—

“Yarf!”

With something like a dog’s bark—or was that a wolf’s?—she turned around, the golden soccer ball still in her hands, and dashed away from Minori-san.

“What in the world? Huh?” one of the JSDF troopers said to me. We were united in our total confusion and our desire to know what the heck was going on. Was her true identity as a spy coming to the surface? Had she figured it was time to stop pretending (or maybe realized she wasn’t much suited to being a spy in the first place) and decided to make a break for it? But what was she hoping to gain by stealing one soccer ball and running away?

But just like the time when she jumped on me, Elvia had those (in manga terminology) spiral eyes again. If we worked from the premise that her instincts had taken over, the question became: which instincts could possibly have motivated her to do this? I was pretty sure she wasn’t, you know, hot and bothered for a soccer ball.

“Somebody stop her!”

“H-Hey, Minori-san, what do you think you’re doing?!” I exclaimed when I saw her reaching for the suitcase she always kept with her and extracting the 9mm machine gun.

Crap, crap, crap. She might as well have spiral eyes, too!

Granted, for her it wasn't so much about instinct as it was the frenzy of having a precious bit of rare merchandise stolen from her; that was all (?). I guess you could call that an otaku's instincts.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

"Don't do that! Hey—if you try that, you'll just end up hitting your merchandise, won't you?!"

"Better that than to see somebody run off with it!" She sounded as if she had just found her lover in bed with someone else; she had no interest in my eminently rational advice.

"That's enough, Koganuma!"

Just as I was thinking things were about to *really* get out of hand, three soldiers rushed up to us. Two of them pinned Minori-san's arms behind her back, while the third ran after Elvia. I couldn't have my artist getting shot, so I joined the chase.

"Hey, you, give that back!" one of the soldiers shouted.

"If you don't give it back, Private Freakout here is gonna let loose with that gun!" another added.

"We soldiers usually have to be really repressed, so when we finally get a chance to let it out, we don't hold back!" said the third.

That's some twisted logic, I thought, but notwithstanding my mental interjections, the soldier closest to Elvia took a flying leap and managed to grab onto her right arm.

"Bow-wha?!" Elvia sounded mad. She was definitely not quite sane—or more precisely, she had gone back to her animal roots. Her exclamation sounded like a dog, and dogs were descended from wolves. She juked and tried to run away, but at the exact same time, the ball popped out of her hands and fell to the ground.

It bounced in front of her; she tried to reach out and grab it, but there was still a JSDF soldier attached to her. He wasn't an especially big guy, but he was enough to make it hard for her to move her arm.

"Oooh!"

Elvia went racing after the ball again. Wait a second—she could run with a full-grown man hanging from her elbow?!

I guess that's a beast person for you. Just like when she had pinned me the morning before: if you wanted to try to force Elvia to do anything when the "phase" was on her, you had to realize you were taking your life in your

hands.

With a certain exasperation, I grabbed Elvia's left arm. Now she couldn't hold the ball.

"Elvia! Elvia, come back to us!"

"Grrr!"

Elvia kicked.

Kicked the ball, that is.

Apparently realizing that she no longer had the use of her hands, she started kicking the ball to keep moving. She would give it a gentle tap with her foot to roll it a little and then run after it, then stop it again with her foot, like a game.

And all this with a soldier hanging off one arm and me hanging off the other.

Hey hey hey hey hey hey!

"Wow!" A collective expression of surprise went up from the other JSDF troopers. Partly because she was doing all this while supporting the weight of two people, but mostly because, in a world where soccer supposedly didn't exist, she was adroitly dribbling the ball. If you didn't find that surprising, what would ever shock you?

There was a distinct possibility that we were all witnesses to the birth of soccer in this world!

Not that it was easy for me to appreciate all of this with Elvia whipping me around.

"Aaaaaahhh! My golden ball! That's a limited edition!" Minori-san, still restrained by her fellow soldiers, was growing more and more agitated. I could see why: the soccer ball was a bit of anime memorabilia, never intended for real use. Plenty of people would have been upset at so much as a scratch on the box, let alone to see the actual ball getting kicked around and covered with dirt.

"Elvia!"

"Yarf!" She clearly disagreed with the fact that the soldier and I were still holding onto her; she gave us both a great shake. Distracted by Minori-san, we had relaxed our grips ever so slightly, and Elvia neatly slipped her arms away from us, sending us flying to the ground a good two meters away.

"Eeowowow..."

I landed with a thud right on my behind, feeling the impact all the way to my bones. It hurt so bad I almost fainted. The JSDF guy, however, said, “You okay, kid?” and offered his hand to help me out. He must’ve jumped to his feet after he was thrown, unlike me. That’s the JSDF for you; they’re a cut above us former home security guards. Which, uh, I guess is to be expected.

Then I looked around. “Huh?” I had only been on the ground about thirty seconds or so, but the situation between Elvia and the soldiers had changed drastically.

“Hey!”

“Yarf!”

“Over here!”

“Yarf!”

.....Huh?

All of a sudden one of the troopers had the ball... at his feet?

Maybe there were some soccer players in this unit, because the JSDF soldiers were dribbling the ball around, dodging Elvia as she jumped at them. In her crazed state, Elvia had extraordinary physical abilities, but it also gave her a sort of tunnel vision—it was like she couldn’t see anything but the ball. The soldiers, working together as a team, were successfully able to keep it away from her.

Elvia, however, looked perfectly happy about this. Maybe she was more into chasing the ball than actually having it. She seemed to be enjoying playing with the ball—or rather, with the troops.

“Hey, over here!”

“Yarf yarf yarf!”

“Yeah, that’s it!”

“Yarf! Yarf yarf!”

In fact, she and the soldiers all seemed to be having fun.

Wait... Wait just a second.

Was this like... like when you toss a frisbee for your dog? “Go get it, girl!” The dog doesn’t actually want the frisbee. It wants to enjoy playing with its owner.

Wait a further second!

Maybe that meant Elvia’s real goal wasn’t the golden ball. As obsessed as she was right now with chasing it around, she didn’t seem upset that she

wasn’t able to get it back.

As I watched the werewolf and the soldiers play ball together, an idea came to me.

I clapped my hands. “That’s it! It’s perfect!”

Even as I was having this epiphany, however, Minori-san was wailing, “Ahhhhh! My gollldennn balllll!”

Which might have caused some serious misunderstandings if we hadn’t known what she was talking about.

“A friendly game?” Petralka looked at me quizzically.

It was several days after the ruckus at the army training grounds, and we were in the small audience chamber. I had suggested the idea of a friendly game of soccer to Her Majesty.

“Or, you know, an exhibition for the empress or something. Whatever works.”

The idea had come to me after seeing Elvia and the JSDF playing together.

We had different races who were quick to get into fights with each other, and we had sports stories that didn’t seem to quite click for people. I was starting to think we could address both problems at once.

We’ve gotten to where the term “friendly match” can sometimes seem like just an expression, but originally it really did refer to a game that was supposed to foster friendship. Through these games, teams representing different countries or groups could come to better understand each other. You know how they say people often get along best after they have their biggest fights? With sports, you don’t actually have to come to blows; you can “fight” within a framework of rules. You can put your heart and soul into it, and when everything is over, each side can admire how well the other did.

At the same time, of course, I hoped that if my audience could discover even a little of what made soccer enjoyable, then soccer manga and anime might gain the same popularity as other things I’d brought over here. If we were lucky, interest in other sports-related stuff might blossom from there.

Talk about two birds with one stone.

"If you want to enjoy baseball manga, it's best to have played some baseball," I said. "Same with soccer. You don't have to go pro or anything. You just need a general idea of what's going on."

"Hmm." Petralka crossed her arms.

"From the prospectus you've submitted, it seems this 'soccer field' of yours is not so difficult to construct." These words came from an old man standing beside Petralka, holding a sheaf of paper in his hand. The man had white hair, a white beard, and was thin as a twig—he looked more like a wizard than a bureaucrat.

This was Prime Minister Zahar. He was one of the most important people in this nation, Petralka's closest advisor after Garius. When you picture an old guy advising a young ruler, it's hard not to imagine he's trying to be the power behind the throne, or that he wants to use her as his puppet, but Zahar really didn't give off any sinister vibes. He seemed more like a grandfather or a kindly old butler. Incidentally, his absence from the previous audience was, I was told, because he had been in bed with a backache.

"If we are to provide Your Majesty with a special viewing area, security considerations would certainly enter into the planning. Otherwise, it's simply a matter of leveling the ground and planting some grass."

Planting grass seemed like it could potentially be a bigger headache than you'd think, but according to Prime Minister Zahar, once you had chosen the type of grass you wanted, it was possible to use magic to grow it into a nice green carpet. One more reminder that I wasn't in Japan anymore.

"Hmm. A mock battle, is it? Most intriguing."

Support for my idea came from an unexpected quarter: the knight Garius. He had his index finger and thumb at his chin in a thoughtful expression; that alone made him look so much like a picture of a knight I could almost hate him for it.

He went on, "Participants separate into two armies and attack each other's bases. If the goal were, say, to attempt to carry an *imarufe bisurupeguze* into the other army's base—this 'soccer' could prove quite a valuable training exercise for the royal knights."

"That sounds awfully dangerous," I muttered. An *imarufe bisurupeguze* was a kind of magical weapon similar to a bomb. It looked like a metal ball

supported by a frame; when activated, the angry fire sprites inside would come flying outward and cook whoever was nearby. I knew all this because I had seen one up close during a terrorist attack, and frankly, just hearing the name again gave me shivers.

"Perhaps we needn't look so closely for practical applications," Petralka said soothingly. She gave Garius a wry smile. "The First Knights have not had occasion for a large-scale engagement for some time. Surely the troops are growing bored?"

"I am... most embarrassed to admit it," Garius said, pulling a face.

It seemed that, for better and for worse, relations with neighboring countries had been at a stalemate for the past several months. Nobody was dying, so that was good, but the knights were finding themselves with a lot of free time on their hands.

When we hear the word "knights," we're apt to imagine noble, elegant, cultured men—but that's mostly an image we get from fiction. These are members of the military we're talking about, professional soldiers. In reality, many of them have seen a lot of blood, and a lot of them are pretty rough customers. This can mean that during protracted periods of peace, they effectively don't get to let the violence out of their system. Then the discontentment and frustration build up, and the knights start ignoring their rules and taking out their unhappiness on the citizens. (You know, it seemed a little bit like Elvia's "phase of the moon" problem that way.)

That got me thinking: Elvia might be an extreme example, but humans do get bored and restless over time. In most cases it's not about being unable to make war, but just about not being able to exercise their bodies to the fullest; it leaves them at loose ends.

"The First Knights have been stuck here in the capital. If we let them participate, perhaps they'll be able to relax a bit. Maybe we can even present an award for martial valor to the winner."

"I don't, ahem, think that will be necessary, Your Majesty," Zahar broke in. "Awards for valor should not be bestowed too lightly."

"We understand that. But having such a reward on offer will bring this game that much closer to actual combat. A simple way of getting the knights engaged."

Zahar still didn't look very pleased. "It is as you say, Your Majesty. But I'm concerned what might happen should someone other than the knights

take victory...”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. Military awards could take a number of forms, but in essence they all meant that the recipient’s social status would increase. A knight would have to really distinguish himself in battle to receive a similar award. But what if it went to a commoner? Would they suddenly become a noble? In other words, handing out these prizes too readily held the potential to undermine the entire class structure of the Holy Eldant Empire. I assumed that was what he was worried about.

However...

“Elder Zahar, I’m afraid I can’t let that pass,” Garius said with a frown. “The First Knights are highly trained and proud. Obviously, I don’t know exactly what this game of soccer entails, but we will all be equal in having no experience of it. Therefore I am confident in saying that my knights shall not lose to commoners or demi-humans.”

Elder Zahar looked like he was in a bit of a pickle. “Erm, that may be so, but...”

I guessed it only made sense that Garius, who was the knights’ leader and a knight himself, would think that way. It wasn’t a baseless opinion, either. Setting aside class considerations, knights spent every day training themselves and honing their bodies. Their endurance and fundamental physical capabilities would be different from those of commoners. The playing field would be even in the sense that none of the participants had tried soccer before, but this grounding in the basics would give the knights a distinct advantage. It made a certain amount of sense to think they couldn’t lose.

I raised my hand. “In that case, I’ve got an idea.”

“Shinichi?” The others in the room, including Petralka, looked at me.

“The award doesn’t necessarily have to be military, does it?”

“Not necessarily. But an official stipend or grant of land would be even more potential trouble,” Petralka said.

Given they hadn’t actually won any wars lately, I couldn’t imagine they just had lots of extra land sitting around that they could give away, and as for a stipend—in essence, a salary increase—you wouldn’t want to risk distorting the economy.

“What if we were to sponsor the competition?” I said.

“What’s this?” Petralka asked with a frown. “*Spon-sorr*?” Garius and

Zahar exchanged a look.

Oops. There it went again. I'd run up against the limits of magical translation.

"It means someone who hosts an event or a festival," I explained. "They pay the money to stage the event."

Needless to say, a sponsor is technically someone who pays to advertise at an event, but there was no need to get hung up on the dictionary definition. As long as the general meaning got across, that was enough. Honestly, I didn't even know if the Eldant Empire had a concept of promoting one's business.

"Like a patron, then?" Petralka said.

"Hmm, yes and no," I replied. "But don't sweat the details." I glanced at my audience again. "I know you've been thinking along the lines of military awards and stuff, but the prize doesn't have to be money or land or whatever, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," Petralka said doubtfully. She didn't yet seem to have grasped what I was getting at.

"Right now, only nobles and successful merchants—a fraction of all the people in the Empire—can get into our school. What if, for example, we created a special system where exceptional teams could gain admittance to study there?"

Strictly speaking, we would give each member of the winning team the right to matriculate.

As I pointed out earlier, our school was experiencing a bit of a boom among the nobility. The empress's alleged fondness for Japanese culture caused many noble families to want to send their children to our institution. But with only two teachers (namely, myself and Minori-san), there was a limit to how many pupils we could take on.

Right now, as a matter of fact, there were more than a thousand people who wanted to get into the school. Some nobles had actually gone so far as to negotiate with students who had already gotten in, asking them to cede or trade their spot in classes. If we were to offer a seat in the classroom as a prize, it would be very popular among the nobles. Even if a commoner with no interest in Japanese culture or otaku culture won the victory, they could sell the spot for a neat purse.

"But Shinichi, did you not tell us that you had reached your limit when it

came to students? Could you accept another ten or more pupils?”

Soccer teams usually have eleven players, so at the very least we would have to have eleven slots ready for the winning team. That would mean a twenty percent increase in the size of the student body when we already just about had our hands full. Petralka was right to be worried. But...

“We’d manage somehow,” I said.

Truth be told, I had been considering bringing in Myusel—and maybe even the JSDF troopers stationed here—as temporary instructors for some time now. Myusel, in particular, could already read and write simple Japanese, so she could become something very important: our first local-born teacher. Actually, Myusel and Petralka were on about the same level when it came to Japanese language, but I figured we couldn’t have the empress running lessons in our classroom. We would, however, need that new maid for this to work.

“Or...” I said, raising one finger, “maybe the prize could be some brand-new manga or other stuff from Japan.”

This idea had come to me when I saw Minori-san fussing over her ball. When you tell people that something is a limited edition, you can usually see the gleam enter their eyes. It’s normal for uncommon items to be more valuable, but it’s purely a function of rarity, not quality or how much money was spent on distributing it.

In that respect, I figured Japan and the Eldant Empire probably weren’t so different. Books weren’t common here, and if it was a brand-new publication from Japan, the value would be that much higher.

“I see.” Prime Minister Zahar was quick to get on board.

There didn’t seem to be a formal division of duties, exactly, but although both he and Garius were close to Petralka, it appeared that the knight handled military matters for the most part, while economic concerns were Zahar’s business.

“That would solve our problem,” the Prime Minister said.

If Amutech was fronting the prizes, they wouldn’t have to give away anything that might upset the balance of the carrot-and-stick system the Empire had going, and Zahar could rest easy.

“Very well,” Petralka said. “Make it so.”

After receiving the imperial blessing, I headed to the school, as was my custom after my audiences with Petralka.

"...And that's the story," I told the students. "We're going to have a friendly match, a bit of a competition... Well, we haven't settled on what to call it yet, but it's going to happen."

You want to share good news right away, right?

The basic rules of soccer are easier to remember than those of, say, baseball, but there's still a lot you have to know to have a proper game. I was hoping to get the students on board right away so that they would start studying up on the rules.

All I saw in front of me, though, was a sea of blank faces.

Really, it only made sense: I'd told them there was going to be a match, but what were they supposed to do with that information? A lot of them probably didn't even know what soccer was—or what sports were, for that matter. Well, I could introduce the concept gradually.

One person raised his hand as if on behalf of the entire group. "Sensei..." It was, of all people, the elf boy who had been fighting with the dwarf girl earlier. His name was Loek, as I recalled. I could hardly claim to remember all the students' names and faces, but I made sure to check who this guy was when I was making a note of the fight he was involved in. It looked like he was a pretty big deal with the elves in the classroom, and his reading and writing scores in Japanese were on the high end. You might call him the "student council president" type.

"Are you saying we're going to participate in this 'soccer'?" Loek asked.

"That's right." I nodded. "Basically, our school is going to be hosting."

Strictly speaking, it would be the General Entertainment Company Amutech that would be putting on the event, but since Amutech and the school were basically indistinguishable from a personnel perspective, there wasn't much point in being fussy.

"But Sensei." Someone else put their hand up—the dwarf girl who had been the other half of that fight. Romilda, was it? Apparently she was the daughter of one of the dwarf families who had contributed to the building of

Holy Eldant Castle, and that made her something unusual—a dwarven noble.

"From what you've said, Sensei," Romilda went on, "a soccer team is made up of eleven people, right?"

"That's right. That's where we get the *Eleven* in *Inzauma*... er, well, you know."

"Yes, but there's more than fifty students."

"Ahem. Yes. That is a problem." I nodded again. "One possibility is to select eleven students from the school. However, I'd like everyone to be able to take part, so I'm thinking more along the lines of having the school field four separate teams."

The students muttered and looked around the classroom.

"That would mean one elf team, one dwarf team, and two human teams. I think, given that some people might feel they just aren't suited to sports, or someone might get sick or injured and not be able to play, we could go with twelve to fourteen people to a team. That should leave us with four squads."

The chatter amongst the students increased.

Really, I had wanted to have people from all the different races on each team, but on reflection I decided that wasn't feasible right now. Just imagine elves and dwarves on the same side: there might not be any team left after a while. I was afraid we would find the friendly had gone out of our friendly match.

"So I guess that sort of makes it a three-way battle between elves, dwarves, and humans."

The students remained confused, and I could see why. I had always been against anything that smacked of racial hostility or discrimination in my classroom, and Minori-san had backed me up on that. The students seemed to have grasped, perhaps in spite of themselves, that their teachers weren't very happy about bickering between the races. So it was only natural if they were a little surprised to hear me talk about something like a "three-way battle" between the different races.

"Just to be clear," I said pointedly, "this is a nice, clean competition with no mean-spiritedness. A fair fight. Forget social status, forget everything. Anyone can win. Give it everything you've got—it would be disrespectful not to."

I was concerned that, in light of their differing social statuses, the elf and dwarf teams might hold back against the humans. Then our tournament wouldn't help build friendship; it might even foster resentment.

"Remember, though, a sports game isn't an actual fight. Punching, kicking, and violence aren't allowed—nothing that would hurt another player. You have to obey the rules if you want to win."

There was hardly a peep. The students appeared to be thoroughly baffled. This wasn't the way to get buy-in. So, with a hint of desperation, I sweetened the deal:

"Oh, say, there's one other thing. The empress herself will be watching this game. An exhibition before the throne, you might call it. I'm sure Her Majesty will notice whoever wins... and incidentally, the winning team also gets a batch of the newest merchandise from Japan."

There was a collective intake of breath, and the students' eyes began to shine.

"Do you mean like a 3TS or PLP?!"

"Huh?" Those were both names of handheld game systems, but I was surprised to hear them out of the blue like that.

"What games do they come with?"

"I hear you can play *Monster Buster 2* on the PLP!"

"Oh, uh..."

For a second, I wasn't sure what to say. The 3TS and the PLP didn't currently exist in the Eldant Empire. We had a couple of PCs and a couple of game consoles at school, and the students could play games during their free time, but I didn't think they had ever seen a portable system. So how could they be asking for them?

It had to be because devices like those were routinely depicted in manga and anime and novels and games set in modern Japan. If you looked at how the machines were shown as being used, it would be easy enough to deduce that they were video game consoles. It was just a short hop from that to the desire to actually see and use one yourself.

So you have something that they knew about, but couldn't get their hands on; something that would allow them to play games not just at school, but at home. Sure, anyone would want that.

Wait a second, though... There had been next to no reaction to my announcement that the empress would be watching the game, but drop in

something about some new Japanese stuff, and everyone went crazy. I decided it was less the students themselves than their parents who were eager to cozy up to the throne. The kids just liked otaku culture. They were less interested in the power and authority it might bring them in the future and more in how diverting it could be.

I glanced at Minori-san. “Would it be... possible... to get enough for everybody?”

As you might guess from my conversation with Matoba-san the other day, after the whole trying-to-kill-me thing, relations with the Japanese government had cooled, and it wasn’t clear yet if they would continue to ship me whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it. So far, as long as I had gone officially through Matoba-san, they had sent me my stuff, but if I suddenly asked for eleven handheld game devices and software to go with them, it was hard to imagine a positive response.

Minori-san, however, gave me a sort-of smile and said, “We’d have to check with Matoba-san, but I don’t see why not. We’re not talking about millions of yen, and for better or for worse we’re on the state’s yen. If anything, I think batteries would be the bigger problem here...”

“Oh yeah...”

Electricity was a rare and precious thing in the Holy Eldant Empire. For the time being, we were getting by on some solar panels and wind power, along with a small gasoline-powered generator. Now we were proposing bringing handheld game consoles to a place with no outlets. The school had plugs, so students who were attending every day wouldn’t have any trouble, but other people would use up the batteries sooner rather than later and be left with a fancy paperweight.

We had toyed with the idea of having mages use lightning magic to create and store electricity, but the lightning handled by wizards tended to be closely related to the natural phenomenon—not something you did halfway, or whose voltage and current could be easily modulated. Hitting a battery with a lightning bolt was as likely to incinerate it as charge it. Minori-san and Matoba-san had shut down this idea of mine on the grounds that it was too dangerous.

“But we have a little spare electric production capacity, don’t we?”

They were just handheld games, after all. If we drew down the amount of time that students were using the PCs and game machines, there would

be plenty of juice.

When I saw Minori-san nod, I turned back to the students.

“Okay. If you guys win, that’s the prize.”

“All right!”

“Woo-hoooo!”

There was whooping and cheering, and one student even broke out dancing. A little jig evidently didn’t suffice, because they started swinging their arms wildly. It was like they were so full of joy they didn’t know what to do with it all. Like a kid who found out you were going to buy him exactly what he wanted for his birthday.

When I stopped and thought about it, I realized that no one in the room was older than twenty—from the Japanese perspective, they really were kids. Their celebrations struck a chord. Yes, they looked like the inhabitants of a fantasy world to me, but at bottom, it seemed like kids in this world weren’t so different from kids in mine.

“You sure this is all right?” Minori-san whispered to me as I looked out over the student body, who were now thoroughly into this.

“Am I sure what’s all right?”

“I just don’t think this is really going to help improve relations between the races.”

“*Au contraire*, Minori-san,” I said, waving a finger at her. “There are some things people can only learn about each other when both sides are giving their utmost for a cause! Come on, you know this! ‘*Hey, not bad.*’ ‘*Yeah, you too.*’ A grudging but friendly respect! Isn’t that what sports are all about?”

Minori-san looked at me silently, and it almost seemed as if she didn’t like what she was seeing.

“Shinichi-kun?” she sighed at last.

“Yes?”

“You don’t play a lot of sports, do you?”

That is correct. No sports.

I didn’t say anything out loud, but internally my answer was unambiguous. A home security guard doesn’t play sports by definition, right? I guess I’d had a stepladder in my room that I occasionally did stepping exercises with...

“So you don’t think you might have an... unrealistic image of what

sports really are?"

"What do you mean? What's unrealistic about my image?"

"Well, for example, this idea that all athletes are outgoing, upstanding nice-guys."

".....Er."

Weren't they?

"Or your belief that if both sides just do their best, it doesn't matter who wins or loses."

".....Um."

"You know people have been hurt and even killed over sports-related grudges, right?"

"Maybe... But..."

"Even your precious soccer. You know about hooligans and soccer riots, don't you?"

".....Y-Yeah, but th-that's the audience, not the players!" I blurted, aware of my ever-tightening expression.

It was true; my mental picture of athletics was heavily informed by the way they were depicted in manga and anime and games. I had definitely never played any sports and only rarely watched them on TV.

"W-Well anyway, I think it's at least worth a shot!" I said forcefully. "Even if it doesn't work out quite the way we want, I don't think it can make things any worse than they already are."

Plus, I mean... sports is sports. Yes, it's a sort of battle, but a regulated one. The two teams might run straight at and maybe even straight into each other, but there were rules; it was a lot more peaceful than just fighting. How could it be a problem? If it looked like things were going to turn into a straight-out brawl, players could be shown the yellow or red cards and ejected from the game.

That, at least, was what I believed at the time.

Classes were over, and I was standing in the foyer of the school, waiting for Minori-san to get back from the bathroom.

"Shinichi-sama!"

I turned to see Elvia and Myusel just outside. Elvia was in her usual clothes, but Myusel was dressed to go out. A maid outfit is really a sort of work uniform, not something you wear outside the house. I know manga and anime often show maids in their uniforms 24/7, but that's just because it's convenient for the animators, or because it's being done as a sort of shorthand.

Anyway, Myusel's going-out clothes were no less pretty or cute than her uniform. She had on a dress with a high neckline, simple and not too revealing—but that was the charm of it.

Incidentally, it was Elvia who had called out to me. Myusel normally called me "Master" in public.

"We brought the balls!"

I saw a pile of large-ish cardboard boxes behind Elvia. Presumably, they had brought them here from the mansion by carriage.

Oh, that's right. I almost forgot to mention: several days before—specifically, the same day as the commotion on the practice field—I had requisitioned thirty soccer balls from the Japanese government. They must have arrived today. As necessary supplies for Amutech's work, they would have been shipped not to the JSDF garrison, but directly to our house. And then Myusel and Elvia had been considerate enough to bring them here.

I had intended to bring soccer to the school whether or not we went ahead with the competition. I had hoped that this "substitute for war," as Minori-san called it, would help the students let off some steam and maybe reduce the frequency of trouble in the classroom.

I wasn't trying to win the World Cup or create a J.League-worthy team, here, so we could cobble together goalposts and nets from locally available materials. Making soccer balls from scratch, though, seemed like a bit too much, so I requested some be brought here instead.

"Thanks," I said, going over to them. "But Myusel, why are you here?" Normally, this sort of thing would be Brooke's domain. Not that unloading air-filled globes was physically demanding...

"Brooke-san said he had something to attend to," Myusel replied, a rare wry look on her face. "He said he was expecting... a visitor, I believe?"

"Huh..."

Seeing Myusel with that expression was strange enough, but for Brooke to have some kind of social engagement... That was even stranger. When

the JSDF special forces attacked the mansion, Brooke had brought some lizardman warriors to our aid. Other than that, though, I had never seen him so much as talk with anyone outside the house. I couldn't picture what kind of friends he might have.

"And so... Well, so, Elvia-san and I..." Myusel didn't quite seem to know what to say. "I stood guard, and Elvia-san did all the hard work of loading and unloading the cargo by herself..."

Elvia scratched her cheek.

"Say what?" Myusel was guarding... Elvia? Why?

No sooner had the question crossed my mind than, combined with Elvia's embarrassed gesture, I made the connection: soccer balls and her reaction thereto.

"You mean..."

"Yes, sir." Myusel nodded. "Things didn't go... completely smoothly at the mansion."

"Ah," I sighed, picturing the imbroglio at the training grounds. No doubt the arrival of a mountain of soccer balls had set Elvia off, and Myusel and Brooke had had their hands full trying to hold her back. Elvia had told me that her "phase of the moon" should end soon...

"You know," I said, turning to Elvia, "I never asked, but what's the deal?" I'd been so wrapped up in my plan for "friendship through soccer" that I never got a chance to question the beast girl about her behavior. "Do you like balls that much, Elvia?"

"I'm not sure it's a question of 'like,' exactly," Elvia said, cocking her head. "Most of us beast people get the 'phase'—well, I mean, most of us wolf-types. Tiger- and bear-types, too. Not so much lizardmen. But anyway, our bodies are influenced by the waxing and waning of the moon."

"Right. I got that much..."

"Well, we worship the moon, especially the full moon, as a god."

"You worship the moon?"

When I thought about it, it wasn't that surprising. Even on Earth, most mythologies deified the sun and moon. It was a sign of how important those heavenly bodies were in people's lives. The moon, which grew more or less full depending on the day, could almost appear "alive," and the way it affected women's biorhythms on a monthly basis made it especially personal.

The sun and moon in this world didn't seem so different from those in my own. The moon came out at night, and waxed and waned day by day. For that matter, the length of a year, a month, and a week all seemed to be roughly similar to Earth's, too. I didn't know if this world occupied a different planet or what, but the similar environment had helped foster cultures that were alike enough to understand each other. A totally different environment might have led completely alien creatures to evolve here, like in an SF drama. There might never have been any humans at all.

"Yeah, although the Eldant Empire and the kingdom of Bahairam both treat it like a sort of evil cult."

"Really?"

Like, as if they were offering living sacrifices to their dark god, Ba'll?

I suddenly got this image of Elvia prostrating herself in front of a production model Mob*** Suit and chanting nonsense syllables. As if.

"They say it's disrespectful to Her Majesty," Elvia said with a halfhearted smile.

"Ah... Now I get it."

Even I could see the connection here. There was no separation of church and state—this was the *Holy* Eldant Empire, after all. It was hardly unusual for rulers like kings and emperors to proclaim to their subjects that they were the descendants of the gods, as a way of ensuring the authority of themselves and their families. The worship of some other god in a country like that wouldn't be warmly received.

Banning unwelcome religious practices, though, was hardly enough to get rid of them. There were plenty of "hidden Christians" during the Edo period, for example. And the more basic the object of worship, the harder it would be to uproot that faith. All the more so if it were connected directly to a biological phenomenon, as it was with Elvia.

"So, when I see something that looks just like the big, round Moon-sama..."

She shivered just thinking about it. Not from fear or cold, naturally, but more like excitement. She looked like she was practically in a trance already.

"Touching something round like that... It gives me a sense of fulfillment..." She made a gesture with her hands as if caressing an invisible ball. "Especially when it's soft and just the right size, like those balls of

yours, Shinichi-sama. Like they would just be so pleasant to fondle...”

Wait... Which balls were we talking about, again? This conversation was taking a dangerously filthy turn.

Hearing the normally adorable Elvia suddenly start talking dirty-ish like that made things hard on me, too. Specifically, the lower half of me, as my mind wandered back to the sensation of her on top of me the other day.

“I’m sure there are plenty of other round objects around, right?”

When I thought about it, though, it actually wasn’t that common in daily life to encounter something the exact size and bounciness of a soccer ball. If you could hold it in the palm of your hand, it would be too small. Any bigger than that though, and anything made of stone or metal would be too hard to really play with—while on the other end of the spectrum, anything made of softer materials like paper or cloth would never survive Elvia when her “phase” was on her.

“We don’t want resentment to build up, huh,” I said, thinking back to my conversation with Petralka. Constantly trying to repress the effects of the phase of the moon would bring its own kind of problems. Next month it might prove impossible to hold the horny Elvia back...

“Right, I’ve got it,” I said. Grinning, I pulled one of the soccer balls from its box. “Elvia, I’ll lend this to you as your personal ball.”

“Wha?” she said, her eyes going wide. “Can... Can I really have it? Isn’t it too valuable for that?”

In light of the dressing-down Minori-san had given her after the incident at the training grounds, it was understandable if Elvia thought soccer balls were rare and valuable items.

“Well, I’m not saying I can give it to you. I can only let you borrow it.”

“Y-You can?!” Her eyes were shining, and there was practically drool dribbling from her mouth. It was cute, but also... a little scary.

“Play with it to your heart’s content. But Elvia—”

“Yesh?”

She sounded a little out of it; she was already staring at the ball in my hand with a laser-like focus. She was only barely retaining control of her sanity. *Is a ball really that big a deal to her?*

“Do you think you can manipulate it with your feet and not your hands? Like you were doing with the JSDF guys the other day?”

“Oh. Yeah, I think I can.”

“Well, that’s soccer. You play by kicking the ball with your feet.” I made a kicking motion. For just a second, Elvia stood blinking, taking in me and the ball.

Then she said, “I’ll give it a shot.”

She took the ball and kicked it. It bounced lightly along the ground; she chased after it, corralled it with her feet, and then kicked it again. It bounced, and she stopped it once more with a foot. Hey, she was pretty good. Not for the first time, I wondered if werewolves had special athletic talents.

The whole time I was thinking about this, Elvia was single-mindedly dribbling (such as it was) the ball.

Bounce. Stop.

Bounce. Stop.

Bounce. Stop.

Bounce. Stop.

Bounce—

“Hey, Elvia?”

“Um, should we stop her?” Myusel said hesitantly. Intent on her dribbling, Elvia was getting farther and farther away. The school was built on top of a gentle hill—which made sense given that the building was originally a windmill—so there was nothing especially dangerous in the immediate area. The space was large enough that if you wanted to, you could just keep walking. Or dribbling.

“Elvia! Hello, Elvia?”

There was no response. She couldn’t hear me.

It was no good. I couldn’t see her face from here, but I was pretty sure she had those crazy eyes again. I had thought if the soccer ball wasn’t golden—if it looked just a little bit less like the moon—she might be able to restrain herself a little bit, but apparently I’d been wrong.

“Let’s go get her back.” Myusel and I jogged off after Elvia, each of us grabbing one of her arms.

“Elvia! Elvia!”

“Gwah?” she blinked, breathing audibly. The phase must have been nearing its end, because she came back to herself much more easily than at the training ground. “Oh, um... Did I do it again?”

“Uh-huh.”

"Yes."

Myusel and I nodded in unison.

"Kicking the ball is all well and good," I said, "but there's kind of... no point. I mean, it's not the most fun thing, right?" I pointed to two trees growing side-by-side near the school. "To play soccer, you kick the ball through a goal. Try kicking it over that way."

Elvia gave me a long, blank look.

"What?" I asked.

"So I can't... just kick it?"

"I mean, you *can*, but..." Did she really enjoy it that much?

"Working the ball with my feet is actually a lot of fun."

I guess she did.

"Okay, well, fair enough, but you need to score goals to win at soccer."

Elvia didn't look very sure about that. What? What was it, had I said something wrong?

"But... If I kick it through that goal, the game is over, right?"

"Pretty much."

Soccer was a game contested between two teams, so naturally there was a winner and a loser. And whether you won or lost, the game would be over.

"Um..." Elvia looked up at me. Yikes. The puppy-dog eyes were bad enough from Petralka or Myusel, but coming from an actual wolf girl, I was like putty in her hands. Beast-girl eyes! It was like I was discovering a whole new horizon of moe!

Okay, easy now.

"Do I really have to kick it through the goal and end the game?" she asked slowly. She sounded like a child being told to stop her favorite game and go home. She looked so... sad. Her usual carefree demeanor gave this change of mood a special poignance.

"I guess... I guess you do, yeah." Faced with that expression, I found I couldn't muster much conviction. I sort of wanted to tell her we didn't have to decide a winner and a loser.

"Master?" Myusel said, watching us dubiously.

"It's just..." I found it hard to talk. "I feel like I'm confronting the deep issues of life... Like, 'What are winning and losing?' or 'Is it really that important to win?' or 'It hurts, the way adults are always separating us into winners and losers.'"

“Of... Of course,” Myusel said, looking thoroughly confused.

Even as we spoke, Elvia returned to dribbling the ball, and was swiftly disappearing into the distance.

What with this and that, it was twilight by the time we came back to the mansion. The sky was a deep red, and everything seemed especially poignant. Back in Japan, this was the time of day when the shops would all be playing *Auld Lang Syne* as they closed up. Just the thing to make your heart a little heavy, to urge you back to your home.

The feeling, if not the ambient music, was the same here in the Eldant Empire.

“It’s like... sort of lonely, you know? Like something is ending,” I murmured as I looked out the window of the passenger compartment of our carriage.

“You mean like that lullaby? *Let’s go home, let’s go home, everybody, let’s go home*?”

“Yeah, like that. You just want to be back in your house.”

“What’s this? Suddenly want to go back to Japan?” Minori-san, sitting across from me, smiled softly.

At the same moment, Myusel, who was beside me, said, “Master?” She was looking at me uneasily. It wasn’t so long ago that I had confessed to her that I thought it might be better if I weren’t here in the Eldant Empire, and it seemed to have left her with a persistent anxiety that one day I would just disappear back to my home country.

“I admit I wouldn’t mind a visit,” I said.

That was the truth. Although I had taken them for granted when we were all living together, after months away from them I was surprised to discover how much I missed my parents and even my smart-mouthed little sister. This despite how, when I had been a home security guard, we had gone months without really seeing each other, and I hadn’t cared.

There was just one thing...

“These days when I say ‘go home,’ I really mean to our mansion,” I said. I pointed out the window at the house, which had come into view. The

house where I lived with Myusel and Minori-san and Elvia and Brooke. That was the first thing I pictured now when I heard the word “home.”

On reflection, I saw that during my time as a shut-in, I had essentially been living on my own, even though I was under the same roof as my parents and sister. And as much as I enjoyed the freedom of the “single” life, sharing a home with other people was just... nicer.

“I guess dropping in on Japan wouldn’t be a bad thing,” I said. “Given the way otaku culture changes every six months or so.”

“We still don’t really have a net connection here, do we?” Minori-san said.

Several attempts had been made to run an internet line to our alternate world, but by all accounts they hadn’t been very successful. A simple analog connection to carry voice was something we could manage, even if there was some interference, but with a high-volume digital line the signal-to-noise ratio was simply too poor, and communication slowed to a crawl.

That was how it was with current broadband standards, anyway. Microchips were supposedly highly vulnerable to electromagnetic pulses during operation; that was why (so I’d heard) weapons designed for nuclear war used vacuum tubes (which are highly EMP-resistant) instead. Point being, maybe there was too much electromagnetic interference in the hyperspace tunnel or something.

“Looking at the anime zines they send over, I feel like a bit of an Urashima Tarou.”

“I guess so.”

As we talked, Minori-san, Myusel, and I disembarked from the carriage —to find Elvia standing in front of us and panting. She had run all the way home from school.

It wasn’t some nasty hazing ritual, or a sign we weren’t friends anymore. It was just that she wanted more than anything to kick that ball, so she had decided to jog alongside the carriage, dribbling all the way.

“Wow, Elvia, you really made it,” I said.

“Hee hee!” she responded, sounding a little embarrassed. Even then, her feet continued to swat unconsciously at the soccer ball. I would have figured it was pretty challenging to keep up with a carriage, but other than a little hard breathing, Elvia seemed to be in perfect shape. I wasn’t even sure if the harshness of her breath was really from running, or because she was

excited about the ball. She really seemed to love that thing. I wouldn't have been surprised if she slept with it by her side.

I was quiet for a moment. That image of Elvia, clasping the ball in her bed, pressing it to her cheek like a lover. Her face would be flushed, her breath coming hard as she ran her tongue along its surface...

Yikes! Just picturing it is suuuper hot...

Well, if that was what it took to take the edge off the "phase of the moon" and keep her from tackling me again, so much the better. Not that I was against a little naughtiness, being a healthy teenager as I was. In fact, I considered being attacked by a beast girl to be a reward of immense value. But what with Myusel and Minori-san in the same house with us, I couldn't help but hesitate.

"Maybe you could give that ball back eventually," I said. "It'd be dangerous to have it rolling around the halls. And you've got your art to do, too."

We had saved Elvia from being executed as a spy on the condition that she would draw for us. For her to go several days without doing any illustrating would look bad on a number of levels.

"Yeah... I know." Elvia handed the ball back to me. If she had been a dog, I had the feeling she would have let out one of those sad little moans. *Gosh, do you really like it that much? Is it, like, your friend, or... more than that?*

I felt a little guilty, but I had to at least try to keep things under control here.

Just as I was having that thought, I saw something unfamiliar move at the edge of my vision.

"Huh?"

More precisely, I saw one familiar thing and one unfamiliar thing...

"Oh, Brooke-san," Myusel said.

I focused in his direction, and it started to make sense. There was Brooke. With him was a lizardman I didn't recognize. Given the profound physical differences between lizardmen and other humanoids, I had some doubts whether I could really differentiate one lizardman from another, but at least I knew which of them was Brooke. They were roughly the same height, but his companion's skin color was lighter. Almost a whitish-blue.

"That must be Brooke's visitor," Minori-san said. Come to think of it,

Myusel had said something about Brooke “meeting somebody.” He and the newcomer were a certain distance from where we stood in the entryway of the mansion. They were talking about something, but I couldn’t hear them.

I watched them questioningly. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I saw the pale lizardman touch Brooke several times, as if asking for something. Brooke, however seemed to pay the gesture no mind. He wouldn’t even look at the lizardman next to him.

Brooke might look scary, but he was actually the picture of openness and honesty. I had never seen him act so cold toward someone.

"I wonder what's going on with him," Myusel said anxiously. So maybe I wasn't imagining it.

As we stood there talking, Brooke noticed us, and leaving the visitor behind, he came over at a lope.

"Welcome back, Master."

"Oh, uh, thanks. Is it... Is it all right?"

"All right, sir...?"

"I mean, leaving your friend like that," I said, indicating the pale lizardman.

For once, Brooke seemed lost for words, but then he said, "Ahem, it's quite fine." He almost sounded like he was covering. I knew there was something odd going on here. Brooke didn't seem to be himself. The difference was subtle, and again, it could have been my imagination, but...

"Now that you've said hello," I said to him, "go back to your guest."

"No need. She was just leaving."

"She?" I did a double-take.

Now that he mentioned it, this lizardman did seem to have an almost feminine air. She was a little bit smaller than Brooke. I just hadn't noticed, because I had never seen a female lizardman before. Their faces looked very similar, and her body wasn't... well, built the way you might expect of a woman.

Come to think of it, lizardmen were born from eggs and were basically reptilian, so mothers probably didn't breast-feed their offspring. That meant there was no need for enlarged chests like human women had. In fact, I had heard that reptiles could retract their reproductive organs and that some of them had duplicate organs. That might be part of what made it so hard to tell males and females apart.

I was suddenly moved to ask, "Brooke... is she your girlfriend?"

"Ahem..." For a second, Brooke seemed lost for how to respond. "She's my... wife."

"Your *wife*?!" I practically screamed. "Brooke, you're married?"

"Yessir." Brooke nodded. "Though I allow it's rather different from human marriage."

"Oh yeah?"

“We’ve no ceremony for it, for one thing,” he said slowly. He had never been the talkative type, but now he seemed more tongue-tied than ever, as if he didn’t want to linger too long on this subject. His facial expression, though, remained as inscrutable as ever.

“Master?” he asked after a long moment. “Is that—?”

“Hm?”

He was looking down at my hand, where I was still holding the ball Elvia had returned to me.

“Oh, right. This is a soccer ball,” I said, holding it up. “And I need you for something, so your timing is perfect.”

“Me, Master?”

“This ball? You use it to play a game called soccer. And Amutech is planning to sponsor a friendly soccer competition in front of the empress herself. We’ve got teams of humans, elves, and dwarves. You know, all the different races. I was hoping you would be part of a lizardman team. You must know a lot of lizardmen, right?”

“Ahem. Well.”

There he went with those ambiguous answers again. I didn’t understand it. Something was definitely different from usual. For some reason, Brooke was staring fixedly at the soccer ball in my hand.

“Are you... ordering me to take part in this game?” he asked hesitantly.

“Huh? Uh... kind of. I mean, it’s more of a request than an order.”

I was actually a little at a loss here. I had been under the impression that Brooke would agree pretty readily. Was there some reason he didn’t want to do this?

If there was some personal reason, I didn’t want to be too nosy. Since I was his “master,” Brooke would probably answer any questions I asked whether he really wanted to or not.

“If this is your command, sir, then I accept,” Brooke said. “I will bring it to the attention of the Tribal Council.”

Come to think of it...

I had heard him talk before about the Tribal Council or the Elders or whoever. I wasn’t an expert on lizardman society, so I could only take an educated guess, but was it possible that Brooke had a certain amount of prestige among his people?

“I must excuse m’self, then,” he said. “I’ve work to do.”

“Oh... Sure.”

We watched him shuffle away. I thought he might go over to his wife, but instead he headed for the far side of the mansion, walking right by the pale lizardman like he didn’t even see her. Like she didn’t exist.

“He didn’t seem very excited, did he?”

“He was certainly taking a good look at that ball, though,” Myusel said.

That was true enough. It wasn’t a total lack of interest on his part—more like he had been staring with unusual intensity. His expression might not change, but after months of living together, we could pick up on that much.

It was then that I noticed someone else staring. It wasn’t Brooke or Elvia fixated on the soccer ball I was holding. It was the pale lizardman, the one Brooke had said was his wife. He—or rather, she—was looking straight at the ball.

“What,” I asked, “is going on here?”

Did *all* beast people worship the moon, or go nuts when they saw round things, or something?

“Elvia?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Do lizardmen have a moon cult, too?”

“Nah, they’re different. Werewolves, weretigers, and werebears, we worship the moon, but I’ve never heard of a lizardman doing it.”

“Huh...”

So what was going on here? If she was Brooke’s wife, then maybe I should say hello to her. But just as I was going over to her, she gave a single bow in my direction and then left at a quick clip. Almost like she was running away.

I didn’t exactly have a good feeling about this.

“This isn’t making any sense,” I said. “I wonder what’s happening.”

“You hear how lizardmen are born from eggs and are cold-blooded and stuff,” Elvia said. “It wouldn’t be surprising if they didn’t think like us.”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess so...”

Something still nagged at me as we all headed inside.

I had eaten and bathed; all that was left in my schedule was to make some short notes about the day's events on my phone and then go to bed.

But actually, this time belonged to me and Myusel.

"Myusel," I said, knocking on the door to the kitchen. There was no reason we had to be secretive about this—but I admit that the kind of secret-rendezvous vibe got my heart pounding.

"Master," Myusel said as she opened the door.

Then we sat on either side of the counter in the tidy room and opened a notebook. Myusel could already read Japanese at a surprisingly high level, but writing was still difficult for her.

Some people might argue that a little bit of telepathy was enough, but I continued to help Myusel study because I so wanted to increase the number of Eldant-language "translators." In exchange for teaching her Japanese, Myusel helped me with my Eldant, and also taught me the basics of magic.

That bit about magic, by the way, was the one thing that would cause real trouble if the Empire got wind of it. Demi-humans like Myusel weren't supposed to teach people magic without permission. It might have been less of an issue if she were teaching a noble, but although I was largely treated like nobility here, I didn't know how far that would extend. And even if I escaped punishment, Myusel would certainly get in trouble for having failed to get permission.

So she taught me magic, and I didn't tell anyone.

In general, we started off with Myusel's Japanese and then moved on to my lessons. It wasn't very formal; we were both at a basic level, so we just sort of traded questions back and forth about things we didn't understand or that interested us.

I took off my ring and said, "Okay, shall we get started?"

"Yes. Shin-ichi-sama," Myusel said, removing her ring as well.

When we were in public, or anytime anyone else was around, Myusel generally referred to me as "Master." She only called me "Shinichi-sama" when it was just the two of us. I asked her once if she wasn't worried she might accidentally call me the wrong thing in public, but she had blushed, looked at the floor, and replied, "Truthfully, I always call you 'Shinichi-sama' in my heart. I just replace it with 'Master.' So I'm not worried."

Yikes. That's suuuuper moe.

Myusel was so impossibly cute I could just eat her up, but I had to

restrain myself.

"Come to think of it, Myusel, are you interested at all in playing in our competition? I'm planning to put Elvia on a mixed team."

There weren't too many beast people in the Eldant Empire. And most of the ones there were were lizardmen. The werewolves, weretigers, and werebears—the traditional "furry beast people"—were actually more prevalent in the neighboring country of Bahairam. And practically none of those in the Eldant Empire had the means to send their kids to school. No chance, then, of creating a were-person team.

"I will... food to take... you... in boxes," Myusel said with a smile.

"We have a word for that," I said. "O-bentou."

"*O-bentou.*" Myusel nodded happily. "*O-bentou, o-bentou.* I will... make.... your *o-bentou*, Shinichi-sama."

"Thanks," I said with a nod. "So you'll be a spectator, huh? Kind of part of the cheering section?"

"What is... *spec-ta-tor*? And *cheering sec-tion*?"

"*Cheering* is when you encourage someone to do their best," I said. "And a *spectator* is someone who watches a match or game." I found it surprisingly hard to come up with definitions for such everyday words. "You're sure you don't want to participate?"

"I am bad at... winning and... losing," she said. She went on to explain, in her halting Japanese, that she wasn't very interested in fighting over things or determining winners and losers. She didn't really enjoy it.

"Winning, losing," she said. "They are angry, the losing people. And winning people... too important. They is too cool."

It was a little tough to follow what she was saying, but the gist seemed to be that the losers would get upset and resent the winners, while the winners would turn arrogant and lord it over the losers. But Myusel didn't know words like *resent* or *arrogant* yet, so she had tried to muddle through with the vocabulary she had.

Judging by Myusel's personality, I figured the words she had come up with were a serious understatement. As someone with both human and elven blood, she had firsthand experience of persecution. In a contest like the one I was proposing, victory would only make her the object of ridicule, disgust, and anger, while defeat would subject her to further shame and humiliation.

“I guess I can’t blame you,” I said, putting my ring back on to signal a shift in the conversation. “Everyone’s got their own perspective on sports. I don’t especially love them myself.”

“But,” Myusel said, replacing her ring as well, “you’ll be happy if this helps people of different races get along even a little, won’t you, Master?”

“That’s right.” I poured myself some water from a carafe. “And if we can improve interracial relations, the treatment of people with mixed blood should get better, too.”

Half-bloods were considered less worthy than pure-blooded people because of a bedrock assumption that it was okay to look down on them or hate them. But if people could come to feel a genuine respect for other races, to accept other people’s best features, then life might get better.

You can see this in the plots of plenty of half-blood-centric works aimed at otaku. In them, the mixed-blood character usually experiences discrimination or persecution, but then the half-vampire or half-elf or half-demon or half-whatever turns out to be even more capable than the people around them, and readers can see how cool they are. They help otaku audiences, at least, understand that mixed blood can be pretty awesome.

And so—

“Master,” Myusel said, her eyes wide. “You don’t intend...”

“Uh, well... Ha ha ha.” I laughed to hide what I’d really been thinking. Myusel was a sharp one, all right. It looked like she’d seen through me.

Reducing interracial strife was important from the perspective of making my classroom a little more peaceful—but it was true that it might also improve the position of mixed-race people like Myusel. That wasn’t my entire goal, but it was a big part of it.

Myusel personally, of course, was good friends with Petralka now, so she wasn’t necessarily in a bad position herself. But that was all predicated on her friendship with the empress—and there were definitely nobles who didn’t approve of Her Majesty’s friendship with a half-blood servant girl. It was entirely thinkable that they would still harass her. In that sense, the best way to make sure people stopped getting hurt was to make discrimination toward or persecution of mixed-race people a social no-no.

“Master... Shinichi-sama.”

Eep. Those eyes... That ‘Shinichi, oh Shinichi!’ Stobbit, it’s sooo mooooe!

Okay, so I didn't actually give voice to that ridiculous thought, but an otaku like me could hardly pass up at least thinking it.

Myusel stared intently at me for a moment, then said, "But, Shinichi-sama." Her eyes flitted to the ground. "If that happens... If half-bloods can be born without stigma... wouldn't you... I mean, wouldn't you end up married to Elvia-san?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, I told you, that was a misunderstanding!" I exclaimed. "Anyway, we're, like, completely different species. Can a human and a beast person even have a baby?"

Humans and elves seemed to differ externally only by the length of their ears and some subtle facial constructions, and I didn't think a difference in magical ability would be important in this sort of context. I thought of it as no more consequential a difference than that between white people, black people, and Asian people on earth.

When it came to beast people, though... They had things humans didn't have. Like tails and stuff.

No, wait, hang on a second. Don't they say that human embryos actually *do* have tails? Isn't the "Mongolian spot" supposed to mark where it was? I had even heard it said that human fetuses went through a process of "evolution" in their mothers' wombs—starting out fish-like, then resembling an amphibian, a reptile, and finally a mammal. So before birth they actually did have tails, albeit small ones.

From that perspective, maybe you could actually think of humans as having tails, even if they were *practically* nonexistent. Why else would we have *tail* bones?

Wow, man... That's deep. Straight from "who can bone?" to the mysteries *of* our bones.

Uh, anyway. Moving on.

"Yes... I think they can have children," Myusel said hesitantly. Fair enough: she had been born into a world where humans, elves, and dwarves could all be classified as "humanoids." Myusel herself was literally the living proof that humans and elves, at least, could procreate together.

"Huh. So a human and a beast person could..."

An image floated into my mind, of Elvia holding a baby with my face. I quickly shook my head. *Uh-uh. No-fly zone. I'm not quite sure why, but that's off-limits.* A kid before I'm twenty? That's too heavy.

Now that I stopped and thought about it, it was obvious: being in heat, from a biological perspective, was precisely the time when it was easiest to get pregnant. In other words, if I wasn't careful and ended up doing it with Elvia while she was on her phase, I really *could* end up with a child.

Thank God we didn't go all the way last time...! I let out a very, very long sigh.

"Shinichi-sama?"

"Oh, uh, nothing! Not one thing."

I gave Myusel my best (slightly panicked) smile, and tried to convince myself that it really was nothing at all.

Chapter Three: Soccer... Soccer?

It had been about a week since I brought up the possibility of a competition in front of the empress, and the Holy Eldant Empire had decided to support the creation of a series of soccer fields. The plan was for six playing areas. One would be right next door to Holy Eldant Castle, so the knights could use it to train. Another would be built for the exhibition game—more of a stadium, with spectator seating, a roof, and even a special viewing box for Her Majesty. It would be built on the outskirts of the capital city, Marinos.

As for the remaining four fields, they would be built in an open space near the school, so that not just the students, but anyone who wanted to, could use them to play. This was both because Amutech was sponsoring the event, and because there were relevant materials in the school library.

The construction would be handled by the JSDF, as well as the Empire's Dwarf Corps of Engineers, whom I had gotten to know during the building of the school. Both units were very familiar with this kind of work, so they whipped through the construction of the four fields near the school. From leveling the ground to erecting the goalposts and even putting up fences to prevent balls from being lost, the entire job took them just two days. As soon as the fields were ready, we opened them to the public.

And so...

"Right! You won't beat me!"

"Bring it on!"

"We're gonna win, or die trying!"

"Show me what you've got!"

Classes were over for the day, and the students were once again on the fields. The raucous voices were coming from the human team. The elf squad was practicing on the field next to theirs.

Once classes were done, students could generally decide for themselves what to do—stick around, go home, whatever. But almost all of them had rushed outside for some enthusiastic soccer practice.

“They’re sure into it, aren’t they?” I remarked.

“They sure are,” Minori-san said, looking out over the soccer fields with admiration.

Minori-san and I had passed out soccer rule books earlier, and it looked like the students had taken them to heart. We didn’t see anyone touching the ball with their hands, or trying to kick on a throw-in, or anything like that. I was surprised at how much they had picked up in barely a week—but then again, the basic rules of soccer are pretty simple. And the students were all excited to be playing a game in front of the empress herself. Maybe that was more than enough motivation to memorize a skimpy rule book.

“I guess they really want those PLPs and 3TSes,” Minori-san said.

“Er... Yeah.”

Minori-san and I were looking out from the library, up on the second floor. All four of the soccer fields were in use, and elsewhere in the immediate area we could see students working on their footing and heading.

“You’d think we were giving out a cash prize...”

I glanced back at the library’s lending record, a notebook lying open on a desk. It had notations in both Japanese and Eldant, indicating who had borrowed what over the last several days.

Your Field of Dreams.

Captain Tsukasa.

*Inazuma El**n*.

Striker on the Verdurous Planet.

Kick-On.

And so on and so forth. It could practically have doubled as a list of all the soccer manga in the library’s collection. None of the entries bore a return date, meaning they were all still out on loan. I figured the students were eating up every bit of soccer-related media we had. It was the same with the anime DVDs. None of the students had video playback devices at home; the most they could do was watch them on the PCs in the self-study room, but still...

“They seem to have found something to study, too,” Minori-san said, pointing to a group gathered in front of one of the computers.

From their size, I guessed they were dwarves. The school was fielding four soccer teams, but since the fields outside were open to the public as well, everyone couldn’t be practicing all the time. The mixed team, the one

Elvia had joined, was using one of the fields, so one of the school teams had to take a bye.

It looked like it was the dwarf team's turn to sit out, and they were using that time to absorb more soccer knowledge and work out a strategy.

"The elves have longer legs, so we won't win by running." Overseeing the dwarf team was none other than Romilda. A piece of paper, evidently standing in for a soccer field, sat on the desk, and she was writing things on it for all the dwarf boys and girls to see. "I swear here and now we'll beat the stuffing out of those spindly-legged tree-lovers!"

"Woo!"

"*Especially* Loek!" Romilda pumped her fist in the air. "Pick a fight with every little thing I say, will he? He's worse than a rock in my boot!"

"You really hate Loek, don't you, Romilda?"

"He makes me physically ill!"

Gosh. Tell us how you really feel, Romilda.

"Seeing that flimsy beanpole he calls a body just makes me—well, it makes me sick!"

She made a sort of screeching sound that I took for anger. The dwarves all laughed merrily.

Okay... I know this sounds crazy, but... Could it be Romilda was actually *tsundere* for Loek, that she actually really liked him, but she was so embarrassed about it that her only way of showing it was to smack him around?

I mean, when you really, passionately love someone or something, it can suddenly turn into hatred or resentment, right? Sometimes the biggest fans of a series turn around and become its biggest critics.

So why not the other way around? You think someone is hateful or stupid or obnoxious—until you cross an invisible line, and suddenly they seem attractive...

"I swear we'll force them to crawl on their knees! We'll force them to slurp down muddy pond water!"

.....Okay, so maybe not.

I sighed. At length, Romilda and the others adjourned their strategy session at the desk in favor of plugging an anime DVD into the big TV on the wall, gathering around in hopes of learning more about soccer.

On-screen, a soccer ball came spinning out of a curtain of flames. Its

trail transformed into a sparkling dragon, and then the title appeared with great fanfare.

Prince of Soccer—FLASH

Oh. Season two of the anime.

The words shattered like glass to reveal a young bishounen soccer player spinning around and around (while flying through the air for some reason) before finally landing on a soccer field like an angel from heaven. It looked like one of those things where there would be a big fuss every time he showed up on-screen—a starburst effect or theme song or something.

Back up. Why was he flying?

I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking the question aloud.

"Masato-samaaa!"

"Ikki-kunnn!"

Romilda and her friends didn't seem the least bit bothered by the quibbles I felt; they were squealing like, well, schoolgirls. Well, except for the boy dwarves. They looked less thrilled.

"I'm glad they're using the materials," I said, "but what good is watching *Prince of Soccer* actually going to do them?"

"Huh? It's fun," Minori-san said, surprised.

"Yeah, but think about it!"

I understood that it was about more than the cute-guy characters. But still, watching those kinds of outrageous soccer battles—call it *Apocalypse Savior Soccer Legend*—wasn't actually going to contribute much to their knowledge of the game.

Once the program started in earnest, though, even the guys seemed riveted to the screen.

"I guess it's not quite what I intended, but if everyone's having fun, then fine..."

After all, one of my objectives with this competition had been to help them understand the virtues of sports stories.

"When you're right, you're right," Minori-san said with a nod.

But there was another factor, something neither of us had thought of at the time.

Minori-san's and my view of these series was based on—you might say

constrained by—what was considered common sense in Japan. But the people of the Holy Eldant Empire didn't share those assumptions. I didn't realize it then, but they were getting some awfully strange ideas about soccer.

Construction of the stadium for our competition had begun in earnest. Unlike the fields we had built for people to practice on, this one didn't have to be completed until practically the day of the tournament, so it had been left till last. A soccer field as such isn't too complicated, but add spectator seating and a special viewing box for the empress, and you wind up with something that calls for a little planning. Just one more reason it couldn't be built overnight.

"What's going on here?"

Minori-san and I had dropped in to see how things were going, and I was surprised by what I found. I had been picturing, you know, a construction site: authorized personnel only, workers coming and going as the walls and stands went up bit by bit.

But that's not what this was. Not at all.

"*Niatoum iruguna*! Quake, O earth!"

No sooner had this spell been chanted than the ground began to shake. You know how in manga you'll see the sound effect *go-go-go* (ruuumble)? This was that exactly. But it wasn't a sound that you heard; it was a vibration you felt throughout your whole body.

A whole bunch of dwarves were in the middle of it all. They had their hands together as if in prayer, the veins on their foreheads bulging so much that I could see them even at this distance as the dwarves struggled to control the magic. The spell sounded more like a challenge to battle than a magical incantation, but this was the sort of magic dwarves specialized in.

"That's awesome," I said, not trying to hide how impressed I was. As we watched, a wall began to rise up directly from the ground. I don't mean metaphorically or anything. I mean literally. As if it had just been buried there all along, waiting to be brought to the surface. "It looks just like the gladiatorial arena from *VOT**S*."

I was on the edge of a nerdgasm, but unfortunately Minori-san wasn't big on robot anime, and she didn't answer me. She didn't know what she was missing. The banter between Chi**co and Ypsi**n was totally yaoi...

Okay, okay. Never mind.

The elves might deride the dwarves as "hole-diggers," but a lot of dwarves made their living as miners, and so had a talent for physical buffs —necessary in such harsh environments—and "civil-engineering magics" that made the work easier. Manipulating earth and stone with magic, fashioning it into whatever shape, was sort of their specialty.

In fact, come to think of it, Romilda's ancestors had been among those who built Holy Eldant Castle, hence the family's treatment as something like nobility. I guess if you want to hollow out a mountain and use it as a house, you'd better have magic on hand.

"I gather they have to finish the details by hand, though," Minori-san said.

It was true: what the dwarves produced out of the ground was less a wall proper than the basic ingredients for one. It was a lump of earth in roughly the shape of a wall. It would have to be leveled, squared off, and polished, and that would require either work by hand or a different kind of magic. It didn't look completely stable yet, either, so some mortar would probably have to be added to keep it steady.

In a word, the dwarves' magic allowed for the rough fashioning of things from the earth *or* fine detail work, but there wasn't much middle ground. That was why there were JSDF soldiers waiting right next to the dwarves, armed with sandbags. They would place them at the foot of the wall to keep it standing, after which mortar could be added. Disaster relief being a specialty of the Japanese armed forces, this was something they were good at.

"Isn't that nice?" I said. It was pleasant to see two groups of people both helping out with what they were best at. People helping each other is a standard trope in sports series, but to actually see it with my own eyes was a new experience. In Japanese, it's proverbial that the kanji for person, □, is actually a picture of two people leaning on each other. So *this* is what they meant! (Big smile.)

And so I stood looking deeply pleased, even though I hadn't done anything to speak of.

“Shinichi!”

I looked up at the sound of my name to see the knight Garius as well as Empress Petralka, followed by a selection of servants and attendants. They must have come to see how things were going.

“Pe—I mean, Your Majesty.”

At my house or in the audience chamber, when it was just us and maybe Garius and Prime Minister Zahar, I called the empress Petralka. But in public or anywhere else where people might misunderstand, I addressed her formally as Your Majesty.

I would have to take a lesson from Myusel and just call her Petralka (ahhh) in my heart, then speak the words “Your Majesty” aloud. To think a time might come when I would turn into a moe character myself—my passion burns bright! ...Ugh. Saying it about myself makes me feel a little ill.

Okay, never mind.

“All hands, cease your work!” Garius called out from behind Petralka. “Her Majesty the Empress is in attendance! Bow your heads!”

In an instant, the dwarves came to a hurried stop and froze where they were. The half-formed wall must not have been quite stable, because it crumbled, nearly burying the JSDF unit nearby.

Petralka gave a gracious wave of her hand. “Well and good. Continue the work.”

This caused another knight to bellow, “Her Majesty commands work to continue! You may offer your thanks, everyone, and then resume your business!”

Boy, what a lot of hassle just so the empress could take a quick look. If she checked on progress too often, the work might never get done.

“It seems the construction is coming along nicely,” Petralka said, walking over to me.

“Yes, thankfully,” I replied. “Everyone is really working hard.” To be blunt, I hadn’t done anything at all. The ones doing all the work were the dwarves on the Eldant side and the JSDF on the Japanese side. I didn’t have so much as a blueprint on me. All I could do was watch from the sidelines and cheer encouragingly.

“That’s good to hear.” Petralka seemed quite satisfied.

I saw Garius approach not me, but Minori-san, and hand something to

her. I looked at them in confusion. What was that? It seemed to be some sort of book...

"Er... Minister Cordobal?"

"Ah. Pay it no mind, Shinichi," Garius said, waving me off. "Merely returning something I had borrowed."

"You? Borrowed?" What kind of book could a knight like Garius have borrowed from Minori-san?

Unless..... No way.

"Oh, just some manga," Minori-san said. But as I got a look at the book in her hand...

"J-Just a second there, Minori-san..."

The book had a flowery, girlish cover, but an opened page showed nothing but men. Two naked men, specifically, sprawled out on a bed. Granted, they were so pretty that they could practically have passed for women, but they were definitely both dudes.

No question about it: this was 100% pure yaoi stuff.

What had that WAC been up to when I wasn't looking?!

"I thought Minister Cordobal might like it," Minori-san said, smiling.

"What do you mean, you *thought* he *might* like it?"

So she had just foisted some soft-core man-on-man action on him?!

I admit: the minister Garius en Cordobal did sometimes look at me with a strange gleam in his eye. I was grateful that he had shown such fondness for me since our first meeting, but could that fondness be... you know, something more? The thought set me on edge.

Garius, however, smiled gently and said, "Worry not, Shinichi."

As if to emphasize his point, he took his gloved hand and set it on my... shoulder? A shoulder is normally where you place a reassuring hand, right?

Agh! Th-That's my neck! Stop stroking my neck!

"Far be it from me to force myself on anyone who doesn't... 'swing my way,'" he cooed.

"I don't know what the hell you're even talking about!" I exclaimed, completely forgetting my formality. How was this supposed to keep me from worrying?!

Where did he even get a line like that? That's not yaoi stuff, that's like from a straight-up gay manga! Please tell me Minori-san hadn't gone that far!

I knew that Minori-san and some other members of the JSDF were importing manga and novels for personal use, above and beyond the stuff I was bringing in for business. It wasn't exactly my place to say, but maybe it was time to think about the order in which things were being brought in.

"Hrm! Shinichi!" Petralka shoved her way over to me and jabbed a finger in my chest so hard I could almost hear it. "We hate you, Shinichi! We despise you! Oh!"

"Say... Say what?" The sudden outburst left me completely flabbergasted. We had been having a perfectly normal conversation until a minute ago, and now, completely out of left field... this? And what was with the weird little exclamation at the end there? *Oh!* Was it an artifact of the translator ring, some word it couldn't bring across?

Seriously, though, what was this all about?

"Is... Is that right?" I said lamely. When the empress bursts out that she hates you, how are you supposed to respond? I mean, if you had asked me, I would have guessed that Petralka was closer to liking me than hating me. Was that impression just another product of my overactive imagination? Given that pretty much my entire romantic history consisted of confusing the affection of an old friend for amorous interest, confessing my love for her, and being shot down, maybe I wasn't a very good judge of these things. "Uh....."

Having said all that, hearing someone say to your face that they hate you still hurts. I quailed inside, but resolved to keep a smile on my face. *Smile with your mouth and cry in your heart.* I wanted to think I had grown up at least enough to do that. Yeah...

"Have I done anything to displease you, Your Majesty?"

"Er—" Suddenly, Petralka seemed to be on the back foot, almost as if she was the one who was shocked by the whole conversation and not me. What was going on here?

"How foolish! Of course not!"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty? In that case..."

In that case, what the heck? I wracked my memory, trying to think of any reason Petralka might have taken a dislike to me.

"Is this because the ●● and ×× that I enjoy in the night creep you out?"

"●●? ××?" Petralka blinked.

"Oh, er, uh, well, you know what wide-ranging tastes I have, and, uh,

I'm not a stranger to *ero* games, see. And I just wondered if tentacle-games might be, you know, and they have— well, there's a certain charm there. And look, I know it might not be exactly right, me playing 18+ ero games, but we aren't in Japan anymore, right? It's Eldant laws that apply here."

"Shinichi," Petralka said, studying me intently. "*What* is it you're doing at night?"

"Oh... Wasn't that what you meant?"

"No! It's just— Aargh!" The empress had gone red with anger. "Y-You don't... You don't have to take everything so seriously!"

"Guh?"

"How could we possibly hate you?!"

"Yeah, I was wondering—"

You took the words right out of my mouth, Petralka.

"You're supposed to be the evangelist of otaku culture around here—so why can't you see it?!"

"See *what*, already?"

"It's—argh!—you know! It's a... a *tundra* thing!"

I was completely silent for the better part of ten seconds. In that time, I finally put two and two together.

"Your Majesty..."

"Yes, what?"

"You mean *tsundere*."

"Hrm? Is that different?"

"Completely."

Although admittedly, *tundra* would describe the state of my heart at that moment.

Whatever the case, it looked like Petralka had discovered the concept of a tsundere in some anime or manga and decided she would try it out for herself. And apparently the classic tsundere line "I don't like you at all!" had gotten lost in magical translation and had simply become "I hate you!"

Japanese can be a tricky language: there are a lot of ambiguous expressions and usages. Maybe it was just lost on Petralka that to not like someone and to hate them weren't necessarily the same thing. Why she had felt compelled to try being a tsundere herself remained a riddle wrapped in an enigma as far as I was concerned, but we could worry about that later.

"Hrm. It seems otaku culture is indeed a thing of depth and mystery,"

Petralka mused.

"Even so, Your Majesty," Garius said.

Er... Excuse me? Things with both of my imperial buddies were turning really strange. And here I had been thinking that Garius at least was a bit more of an impassive, neutral observer...

"Minori-san," I said to our resident rotten (and getting rotten-er by the day) WAC. "Is it just me, or do I have a creeping sense of anxiety about this?"

"Trust me," she said, smiling innocently, "you're imagining it."

When we got back to the house, we were taken aback by what we found. Specifically, what we found out back.

Myusel had looked a little troubled, a little hesitant, when she came to pick us up. When I asked her what was wrong, she led us around back. And there...

"Brooke," a voice pleaded. "Can't we—Can't we begin again, just one more time?"

Oof. That's a line straight out of a romantic drama if I ever heard one. I never thought I would actually catch someone saying it for real.

I could see two figures behind the house. One of them was Brooke. Facing him was the pale-skinned lizardman, the one he had called his wife. She was aiming her question at Brooke, but he didn't respond. In fact, he wouldn't even look her in the eye. His own wife!

"Answer me, Brooke. Don't you love me anymore?"

But Brooke remained silent.

You could take this for a conversation out of just about any strained marriage, if you didn't see the two lizardmen who were holding it. Each of them was at least a head taller than me and covered in rough scales. It was surreal, to say the least.

Brooke's wife faced her silent husband, waiting patiently for an answer. But ultimately, Brooke said only two words.

"Go home."

He turned and began to walk away, despite his wife's attempt to stop

him. He didn't seem to have noticed us in the shadows of the building.

For a long moment, Brooke's wife looked after him, but then she seemed to resign herself; she, too, turned to leave. In fact, as it happened, she turned right toward us.

"Oh..." For the first time, she realized we were there. I still couldn't read exact expressions on those scaly faces, but the slight tilt of her head suggested reluctance. She stopped square in front of us. "I'm very sorry for intruding," she said with a bow of her head. She may have looked like a bipedal lizard, but her diction and manners suggested a very fully formed person.

"Don't worry. You're not intruding," I said. Seeing Brooke ignore her once—well, things happen. But this was twice now, and it was starting to bother me. "So you're, uh, Brooke-san's wife, huh?"

"Yes. My name is Cerise." She gave another respectful nod. "The bonds among my people are not precisely the same as those humans share, but in the language of your tribe, it would be reasonable to call me Brooke's wife."

"Huh..."

That seemed like an awfully roundabout way of saying it, but all right. Lizardmen were more visibly different from humans than most of the races here, so maybe these sorts of qualifications were inevitable in talking about their society.

Interestingly, in nature, it's actually pretty rare for specific individuals of opposite sexes to commit themselves to each other like humans do in marriage. If your goal is to perpetuate your genes, then your best chance is to bear children with a different partner every chance you get so your descendants have plenty of variation.

But anyway, forget about that for now.

"It looked like you and Brooke were talking about something... kind of."

"Yes. This was initially about getting in touch with the Tribal Council..."

Cerise told us that Brooke occasionally contacted the Tribal Council, a group of lizardman leaders. Usually he did it by giving a message to some acquaintance of his who happened to be in town. Given the low literacy rate among lizardmen, such a communication network was a necessity.

Normally you think of such networks as using the same people to carry messages both back and forth, but apparently this time the reply had been

entrusted to Cerise.

“The Tribal Council is inclined to participate in the match before Her Majesty,” Cerise informed us.

I thought back to when I had asked Brooke to form a lizardman team. He hadn’t seemed very enthusiastic, but it was clear that he had still done what I asked.

“There’s a hope that if we do well, it may raise the status of our kind,” Cerise said.

“Right. I had the same thought,” I said.

Humans and demi-humans of various races lived and worked side-by-side in the Eldant Empire, but lizardmen remained on the bottom of the totem pole. Maybe that made sense, given that they had once been the enemies of the other peoples—but that had been more than a century ago, and personally I had never known Brooke to be anything but a diligent worker who helped me out whenever I needed it. Granted, I wouldn’t want to tangle with him in a dark hallway, but...

“You,” Cerise said, nodding at me. “You’re a human. Why would you be interested in the welfare of the lizardmen?”

“Er... That’s not an easy question to answer,” I said, scratching my cheek. I just felt like if someone was being discriminated against, I wanted to do what I could to raise them up in the world and get them equal rights. But I could only think that way because I had been born in the nice, peaceful country that was modern Japan.

“It’s because I’m not from this world,” I said. “It looks like lizardmen and humans were enemies once, but I don’t have any personal or cultural memory of that. Brooke works at my house, and he seems like a really decent person. He helps me out a lot. It’s just kind of natural for me to hope that he and his people could be treated a little better around here.”

Cerise was silent. From the way her tongue slid in and out of her mouth, however, I guessed she was surprised. Just like I couldn’t readily tell different lizardmen apart, Cerise probably didn’t know me from any other human—in other words, any of the others who happily discriminated against her. Maybe that made it difficult for her to believe what I was saying, as if I had thrown up my palm and declared the exact opposite of everything she had expected. It would be confusing.

That was when Myusel interceded on my behalf. “That’s the sort of

person Shinichi-sama is. He's done a lot for me, too." She gingerly raised a hand to her hair, pulling it back to reveal her ears. She hated for strangers to see her ears. But either because of some change of heart, or to back me up, she was willing to endure the ignominy.

"You're—"

"Yes. A half-elf." Myusel nodded.

Now Cerise was definitely a bit surprised. She stood there, not saying anything, until finally she managed, "Shinichi-sama... That's your name, isn't it?" She sounded hesitant. "You are... a most unusual person."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot." I grinned. From Myusel and Brooke, among others. I didn't think it was because I was particularly special or anything. Anyone born in modern Japan and brought over here would fit the description. Anyone born and raised in a world where freedom and equality were matters of course.

Cerise went quiet again, studying me. Then she said, "I see. You are also the reason Brooke went so far as to contact the Tribal Council for help."

"Huh?" It was my turn to be surprised.

I suspected she was alluding to the assassination attempt. Brooke had brought several lizardman warriors, presumably in the hopes that they might be of some help lest I be kidnapped or killed. He had been so nonchalant about telling me that he had contacted the Tribal Council that I had assumed it was a normal thing to do, but...

From what Cerise told us, it was rare enough for Brooke to get in touch with any other lizardman, let alone the Council. Apparently, the assassination attempt was the first time they had actually been able to pinpoint his location. It was also what had led to Cerise coming here.

Wait...

Pinpoint his location? So he had been, like, a runaway until now? A missing person? How and why had that happened? Could it be that Brooke didn't really get along with his own kind? And if so... had he deliberately given himself away, contacting the Council for my sake?

"Brooke..."

I owed him even more than I'd realized. I wanted to find some way to repay him.

"The Council says that over the next several days they will find eleven participants and send them here to you," Cerise said.

Lizardmen generally slept outdoors. As long as they had someplace dry, they could just dig a hole and go to sleep. They could draw on geothermal energy, according to Cerise, so there was no need for us to prepare a place for the visitors to sleep.

“Eleven participants?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Er... What about Brooke?” I had expected him to be among the eleven. “Oh, or do you mean eleven people including a backup?”

“No. Brooke will not take part,” Cerise said firmly. “Even though the Tribal Council asked him—our hero—to do so.”

“Brooke... Your hero?” That seemed to come out of left field. “Wait a second... Brooke is actually a pretty big deal among the lizardmen, isn’t he?”

After a moment of what seemed to be hesitation, Cerise nodded and said, “Yes, he is.”

She told us the story: once, Brooke had been a general of his people and had achieved a series of military victories that greatly improved the lizardmen’s position. The lizardmen had always been fighters, but Brooke was strong even by their standards, and so earned their respect.

That, however, made it seem like he might have been better off staying with his own people, remaining in the military. Why leave all that to serve a human as a gardener?

“I mean, why would he...”

But Cerise didn’t answer my question. Maybe it was a hard one to answer. Maybe it had something to do with Brooke’s refusal to acknowledge his wife.

“I think I must be going for today,” Cerise said. She bowed to us and walked away.

“She’s really something,” I said as we watched her go.

“Yes, I think so, too,” Myusel said.

“Brooke didn’t seem to want anything to do with her,” I said. “I wonder why.”

Myusel shook her head silently. It looked like it didn’t make sense to her, either.

“Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, finally speaking up. “I don’t think you should be nosing around in people’s private lives. Especially not lizardman

lives. They're so different from us that you might think you're doing the right thing but end up causing new problems."

"Yeah... You're right," I said, nodding. But deep inside, I wasn't quite sure.

I am not very smart.

Oh, sure, I have a pretty good amount of otaku knowledge—but not much else. And frankly, after a certain point, I don't think hoarding knowledge does you much good. There's a baseline level of information necessary to think and make decisions, but it's not like you're going to become a specialist in every field, and in an age when we can quickly look up just about anything we want on the internet, volume of trivia alone isn't anything to be proud of. If intelligence has to do with the number of facts you can cram into your brain, then computers are way smarter than humans.

So what do I consider real smarts? I think smart people are those who can quickly make use of the knowledge they have. People who can extrapolate from what they already know. They're the ones who can tell what's going to happen, and the ones who can do something about it.

I don't really see myself as that kind of person.

So what am I getting at with all this? Well, uh...

I was standing there, absolutely dumbfounded.

It was just another day, and classes were over. The students, as usual, were on the soccer fields beside the school, practicing for the imperial exhibition. I was watching the elf team. Led by Loek, the moe-loving elf who had fought with the dwarf girl Romilda, the team had divided up into groups of five and were having a practice match.

"Graaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

I stared stupidly as one of the players let out a very un-elf-like yell and gave the ball a vicious kick.

And that was fine. That much was fine. The problem was—

"Cry out, O magical globe!"

—as the elf shouted, the ball burst into flames. I don't mean metaphorically. I mean *whoosh, fwoosh!* Fire.

What the heck was going on here?!

"*Retosabunogarudo raripusu*!" the elf added.

The ball took a corkscrew path, burning all the while, and went hurtling toward the goal. It seemed less like a soccer ball and more like a cannonball, or maybe a falling meteorite.

"Haaaaaaaaahhhhh!"

The goalkeeper was evidently charged up, because he gave a huge shout and took a defensive posture, arms crossed in front of his body like he was going to do a karate X-block. No way he thought he was going to stop that rocket ball like that, right? It would have been hard enough even if the ball wasn't actively on fire. Instead of standing there like he was going to do some anime-style finishing move, shouldn't he be getting his hands out to catch it?

Even as I was thinking all this, though, the goalkeeper gave another mighty shout, dropped his arms to his sides, and thrust his head forward. What the heck?! It was like he was deliberately going to head a burning ball! But if he met that thing face-first, it wasn't going to end with some cute little "Yowch!" or "That's hot!"

"*Tinifuini eruou*!"

Right in front of the elf's face—almost literally before his eyes, so to speak—a translucent barrier appeared. The ball, still on its spiral course, slammed into it. The barrier bent, distorting the look of the scenery around it, but it didn't give way.

The ball was thrown back with almost as much force as it had been kicked forward. The flames were extinguished by their contact with the barrier, but the speed of the ball alone was enough to kill someone.

"I've got it!" a different elf shouted, flying forward. Again, I'm not speaking figuratively here. What was this guy, the South Dipper Human Cannon?! Without so much as a running start or even bending his knees, the elf flew through the air and headed the ball.

That sent it back toward the goal, but it went out of bounds at the last possible moment.

"Dang! So close!" all the elves exclaimed. For some reason, they all snapped their fingers as they spoke.

Okay, wait. Hang on. Where did these kids learn to play like this?! All this ridiculous *Shaolin So***r*-type supernatural stuff? I was very nearly going to ask the question aloud when it dawned on me.

Magic.

A close look revealed that the elves were all chanting as they ran around the field. Maybe not the person who was actually kicking the ball, but everyone around them—all their fellow players—were helping them, intoning spells that changed the direction of the wind or created a burst of flame or buffed the speed of the ball or the players' own agility.

"They're..."

"Yep," Minori-san said from beside me. With a touch of frustration she added, "Maybe we should have seen this coming. All that *Inazuma El**en*, all those series with outrageous, impossible stuff in them—if you don't know anything about soccer, why wouldn't you think that was the way the game was played?"

"Even if you did—you couldn't actually do it!"

Shout and pose all you wanted; you couldn't do a Spirit B*** or a Kameha**ha, or use the devastating ancestral technique passed down by your forefathers, or activate some latent special ability.

Not, at least, in my world.

"Magic," Minori-san said.

I could only nod.

Yes: magic existed in the Eldant Empire; indeed, everywhere in this other world, and the elves, flush with magical power, were especially good at it. They had taken those absurd cartoon soccer battles to heart and re-

created them using magic.

In Japan, it's pretty common to see books that take otherwise difficult or arcane subjects, fit them in a narrative framework, and present them in manga form for easier digestion: *Japanese History through Comics*, *Learn Bookkeeping and Accounting the Manga Way*. That sort of thing. The kids had just picked up their knowledge of the game from anime and manga more than from the rule books Minori-san and I had brought them. And they had been consuming the most outrageous series available.

That meant...

"Um... I'm gonna go check the other fields," I said, and hurried to the next one over.

Our soccer fields were open-air; they didn't have roofs over them. They did, however, have walls to keep our limited supply of balls from disappearing off the field. Hence, if you weren't looking down from above, you wouldn't know what was happening on the field unless you actively went inside and looked.

These walls, just like the ones I had seen going up around the stadium for the tournament, had been built by dwarven magic. Just as that suggested, I found the dwarf team practicing on the next field.

They say those of a feather fight together, but like the elves next door, the dwarves had assigned one person to be referee and divided the rest into two teams of five.

"Get in there!" A dwarf ran along, kicking the ball. He was pretty nimble despite his small stature. Dwarves and elves might both be faerie-type peoples, but dwarves clearly were on a different level of physical ability.

I was at least relieved to see that the ball wasn't on fire or anything. It was nice, normal, kick-the-ball soccer.

"You think I would let you do that?!" A dwarf girl—it was Romilda—uttered a line that sounded like it belonged to some mecha anime, then slammed her hands against the earth.

No way, I thought.

"*Eruou iruguna*!!" Romilda howled.

With a *wumph!*, a wall burst out of the ground right in front of the dwarf who was dribbling the ball. As I'm sure you realize by now, I'm still not being metaphorical: this was an actual wall. The spell sounded somewhat

familiar—it was probably a reduced version of what the dwarves had used to build the stadium.

"Nice try!" The kicker nimbly dodged the obstacle.

Romilda, however, shouted, "Hit it, everyone!"

"Yah!" In response, the dwarves on her team all put their hands on the ground.

Wait a second... Weren't we supposed to be playing soccer? But there was no time for me to interject as—

"*Eruou iruguna*!"

"*Eruou iruguna*!!"

"*Eruou irugunaaaa*!!!"

Wham! Wham! Wham! Walls began popping up everywhere, surrounding the guy with the ball.

"I think I remember *Fullm***l Alchemist* having a fight scene like this," I murmured in a daze. But now the dwarf with the ball was shouting.

"You're not gonna get away with this! *Ekansu gunigiddo*!"

There was a huge bang, and the dwarf disappeared from within the walls.

No... Not disappeared. He fell, into a hole that had suddenly appeared beneath him. Heck, fell? He practically flew. Dwarven magic had always been about manipulating the earth, making walls out of it and stuff. It was only natural that they would have a network of tunnels and secret spaces under the ground, layer upon layer of them. The dwarf boy had used his magic to simply dig straight down to them.

"Where'd he go?!"

"And where's he going to come back?!"

The dwarves formed a half-circle around the goal.

"Right here!"

"Noooo!"

The dwarf with the ball popped back up to the surface *inside* the goal.

"How did that happen?!"

"Wait, wait! The rule book says you can't dig a tunnel into the actual scoring area," Romilda insisted.

"It does not!" I found myself exclaiming.

There was a shocked silence as the dwarves finally and suddenly registered my presence. They stopped their game and came over to me.

“Sensei!”

“Sensei!”

“What do you think? How are we doing at soccer?” Romilda, her face shining, asked on behalf of the group.

“Well, uh, that’s a good question,” I said, scrambling for the right words. “What... game exactly were you playing?”

“What do you mean? We were playing soccer.”

Now I stood silently; what could I say? I mean, I guess that was soccer... of a sort. At least, it definitely wasn’t American football or baseball or dodgeball or anything. The field, the ball... everything met the official requirements for soccer. And yet...

“Magic?! You can’t use magic!”

“What?!” the dwarves asked, eyes wide. “W-We can’t?!”

“But it doesn’t say anywhere—”

“Of course it doesn’t!” I said, practically shouting. “It’s a sport, and—”

That was as far as I got when I remembered: the Holy Eldant Empire had no concept of sports. Or rather, they thought of such things very differently. On Earth, where there was no magic, we naturally thought of these games as contests of physical abilities. But in this world, maybe it only made sense that the contest should extend to magical ability as well.

Even in my own world, we used tools and high-functioning equipment that strictly went beyond the human body. Marathon runners have watches; in soccer and baseball, people use spiked shoes or footwear with special shock-absorbing gel. Even in swimming, which may seem like the purest test of human capability, participants can use swimsuits that reduce water resistance. It was up to the international sporting bodies in charge of these competitions to determine what was “unfair” and what wasn’t.

But there weren’t any international sporting bodies here. There was only me.

“Sensei?” Romilda and the others were looking at me, concerned. They were only trying to do their best, and here I came, shouting that they were getting it all wrong. They didn’t have any ill intent, and I’m sure they didn’t mean to disrespect soccer or anything. But still...

“Okay. Uh,” I mumbled, struggling with a vague sense of guilt. “Magic isn’t allowed in soccer. I’m real sorry. My world doesn’t even have magic. That’s why it’s not in the rule book.”

Romilda and her friends froze with a collective gasp. Then they all sat on the ground, looking dejected.

"That's it..."

"It's over..."

"This is the end..."

"Two weeks of work..."

You would think I had sentenced them to death. Watching them sit there and groan among themselves was almost as hard for me as it was for them. I felt like I was forcing something terrible on them.

"Hey, uh, but you can just play without magic, right?" I said in a hurry. "It looked like you really had dribbling down and stuff."

I pointed to the dwarf who had been kicking the ball. As far as I had seen, the dwarves had used their magic to build walls and dig holes, but as for basic soccer technique, that was all them. So why not just play?

"But that..." Romilda said, a panicked look on her face, "that would make us like children playing against *them*."

"Them?"

I let my gaze follow Romilda's finger: she was pointing at the third soccer field...

The dwarf boys and girls wouldn't say anything more, so I had no choice but to go over and have a look for myself.

"Ahhh hahahahahahahaha!"

No sooner had I arrived on the third field than a burst of almost ecstatic laughter reached my ears. It was coming from—

"Elvia?!"

Yep. The adrenaline-high belly laugh was coming from my own personal beast girl.

The third field was currently occupied by the mixed team, for which anyone could apply. It wasn't students on this team, but regular citizens of Marinos; there were eight humans and three beast people.

The beast people were standing smack in the middle of the soccer field, passing the ball to each other and looking like they were having the time of their lives. The humans, however, were standing on the sidelines, looking bored.

"Take that!"

"Got it!"

“Hi-yah!”

There was Elvia. There was a young guy with two-colored hair who looked like a weretiger. And then there was a large girl with round ears, probably a werebear.

Elvia and the beast people loved soccer balls so much that I figured I couldn’t keep them off the field if I wanted to, so I had asked Elvia to go into town and find some young-ish beast people to participate.

But what was going on now? I took a few steps onto the field and stared vacantly at the beast people’s game, just like the human players. Seriously, what *was* this?

The ball—

“Rrah!”

“There!”

“Try this on for size!”

—it never touched the ground. The beast people were essentially playing hacky sack with it, as if the whole point were to keep the ball in the air. And the way they were doing it—Elvia and her friends would jump up to kick the ball and then jump up to catch it, all using their feet, of course. They would twist and dodge in the air, kicking and blocking the ball again and again.

Bicycle kicks were all well and good, but this was soccer as air war. They might as well have a sign saying *Hands off, humans!* Er... or *Feet off*, I guess. Whatever. The point is, the ball was never less than three meters off the ground. Heck, a bicycle kick would practically be the starting point for a game like this.

I stood dumbfounded. I knew beast people had serious athletic abilities, but this was ridiculous. It was like something straight out of *Shaolin So***r*, but without the supernatural powers.

“So that’s what they meant.” I finally understood why the dwarves were so unhappy to hear that magic was off-limits. Against a team like this, you couldn’t even hope for a fair fight without magic. What was more, watching the expressions on the faces of Elvia and her friends, it was clear that they weren’t even being serious. They were just playing, knocking the ball around; it wasn’t a proper contest yet.

I shuddered to think what would happen if they decided to really play. No human would be able to so much as get a toe on the ball.

“They’re right...” This was something else.

As I stood thinking, Elvia noticed my arrival. “Oh, Shinichi-sama!” she said, breaking off her game and coming over to me. Her eyes were sparkling; she was palpably fulfilled. “I didn’t realize you were here!”

“Oh, uh, sure. Say, Elvia...”

“Man, but this is a great game, this soccer!”

I didn’t say anything. A question—did what they were doing count as soccer?—flitted through my mind, but Elvia looked so happy that I couldn’t bring myself to voice it.

Still, there was a real dilemma here. Without magic, the beast people would have an unbeatable advantage. But at the same time, I could hardly tell Elvia and the others to hold themselves back.

“Oh... I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” I said lamely. Elvia nodded enthusiastically, her tail wagging in time.

“I sure am!” she said. “A whole lot!” Behind her, the weretiger and the werebear were both giving me big grins. They looked so happy. So innocent. What was I supposed to say to them?

“That’s...” I started. “...Great,” I finally managed, nodding without much conviction. “Have fun, then.”

“We sure will!” Still grinning, they launched the ball back into the air.

I waved the dispirited humans over to me.

“You know what? You can use magic.”

Chapter Four: The Hero Stands upon the Field

“Things are like a rolling rock.” I vaguely remembered reading those words in some manga or light novel somewhere. I wonder which one it was.

Often, it takes a lot of effort to set things in motion, but once they get going, it’s almost impossible to stop them—even for the person who started them in the first place. I think that’s what the line is supposed to mean. And at the moment, I was experiencing the meaning of that saying firsthand.

It was the day of the exhibition match. I went to the stadium, nursing a slight headache. Riding beside me in the carriage was Myusel, who carried a basket with a packed lunch. Across from us were Minori-san and Matoba-san. We didn’t see much of Matoba-san around the house these days, but this was a pretty big event—what with the empress attending at all—so he was coming as a representative of the Japanese government.

I didn’t mind that as far as it went, but...

“Master?” Myusel gave me a concerned look. “Is something the matter?”

“Huh? What?”

“Oh... Forgive me for being forward,” she said carefully, “but I couldn’t help noticing that something seems to be worrying you.”

“Ah...” I gave an ambiguous smile. At this point, it was all I could do. “I’m not sure I’d call it worrying, exactly...”

“Hey, why let it bother you?” Minori-san offered. She, at least, seemed to have picked up on what I was concerned about—or more precisely, what I was at the end of my rope about. Then again, one glance at those practice fields would have been enough to give it away. “It’s not like you’re trying to get any of these teams into the World Cup,” she went on. “Let Eldant do soccer its own way.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said with a sigh.

Practically speaking, I supposed there wasn’t really a problem. Yet I

couldn’t help feeling very, very worried.

“Hrm...”

In due course, we arrived at the imperial stadium. The driver opened the carriage door and respectfully ushered us out.

“You certainly took your time, Shinichi!”

Who should I see waiting for us but the loli (in appearance only) empress?

“Pe—er, Your Majesty?”

“We have been waiting most impatiently!” she said with her characteristic air of authority. It seemed like she was genuinely excited about this match. Garius had mentioned to me that at one point Petralka had been bent on forming her own team and participating in the tournament. He said it had taken quite a while to talk her down.

Having the empress herself take the field would understandably intimidate everyone else to the point that having a game would be impossible. And soccer could be a pretty rough sport, even before you factored in the magic and beast people. If Petralka went out to play and ended up getting hurt, it might cost someone their head.

Yes, definitely better for her to sit quietly and watch.

“Ho. So you’ve come, too, Myusel.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Myusel said with a bow. “With the permission of my master...”

“...Hm,” Petralka replied, nodding graciously.

Petralka and Myusel had been quite close ever since the “assembly of patriots” incident, but even so, Myusel was careful not to act too familiar toward the empress. She was just being circumspect, but Petralka seemed to find it irritating sometimes.

“In that case, you shall accompany Shinichi,” the empress said.

“Accompany me where?” I asked, and for the first time, Petralka smiled.

“To our viewing box, of course.”

How did this happen?

It wasn’t the first time I had found myself flummoxed and confused like

this. As I recalled, I had felt the same way when I was reading manga to Myusel and Petralka.

This time?

“Ah, an excellent view!” Petralka exclaimed happily... from her place on my knees.

That’s right: once again, Her Imperial Majesty was sitting on my lap. She kicked her legs back and forth in breathless anticipation of the opening ceremony. It was adorable, but to be perfectly honest, I wasn’t able to enjoy it.

“It’s almost a little frightening, isn’t it?” Myusel said from her seat beside me. At that moment, we were in the special viewing area built for Her Majesty. It was, needless to say, something altogether different from the rest of the spectator seating. Glass, held together by wood frames, surrounded most of it. Frankly, it felt a bit like being in an aquarium. The floor itself was hardwood, but the glass extended as near as possible to our feet to afford the best view of the field. It gave the sense that the box was floating in the air, and it had inspired Myusel’s completely understandable comment.

In light of the security needs of a setup like this, it had been decided in advance who would sit where. In addition to Petralka, Garius, and Prime Minister Zahar, there were places for me and Minori-san and even Matoba-san. But Myusel’s presence, apparently, had been unexpected; there was no seat for her. The upshot was that someone would have to stand, or at least sit on the floor.

Myusel, sweet and retiring as always, had offered to take the floor, but it bothered me to make her sit on cold, hard wood when I was in a nice, plush chair. We were trying to decide how to handle it when Petralka announced, “We shall sit here, then,” and pointed directly at me. Thus, the current state of affairs.

Myusel was sitting beside me, meaning I had the gorgeous young empress on my lap and a beautiful maid one seat over. Anyone would assume I must be in seventh heaven, even if I might also be feeling a little awkward...

And in the past, I might have agreed with them. The reality was, flop sweat was rolling down my forehead. Confronted with the actual situation, I found I didn’t have the wherewithal to enjoy it.

For one thing, this space was mostly glass. That gave us a great view, sure, but the Holy Eldant Empire didn't have one-way mirrors, so we were on display for everyone who showed up. The imperial viewing box was located at the highest point of the stadium, but some of the spectator stands reached this height, too; if anyone were to look over and see me with the empress on my lap and a maid sitting next to me, what kind of person would they think I was?

"It has been tested for strength and durability, of course." This assurance came from Garius, who had set his hands gently on my shoulders. Wait—*why* were his hands set gently on my shoulders? I considered asking, but was too afraid that the answer might launch us straight down a truly 801 (yaoi, remember?) path, so I kept my mouth shut. "You needn't worry, Shinichi."

"Uh-huh..." That depended on what he thought I was worried about, but never mind.

Incidentally, Petralka's viewing box was well separated from the rest of the stands. Partly that was because, well, it was for the empress, but I gathered that security considerations also played a large role. It really wasn't that long ago that Her Majesty had been held hostage by terrorists. The box's excellent view meant it would be possible to spot anyone suspicious long before they got close. Mages and knights were posted just outside, making sure no one unauthorized came near the box.

None of this, however, seemed to bother Petralka, who was in high spirits.

"Ooh! We cannot wait!" She continued fluttering her legs happily.

Aargh! Every minute she does that, she gets cuter and cuter!

I could feel her behind on my knees; her hair was so close to my nose I could practically smell it. My heart started pounding with the moe-ness of it all, despite how dangerously close I was to Petralka. It was right about then that I thought I felt a squeezing on my left shoulder.

"Huh? What's up?" I turned to the side. For some reason, Myusel was looking dejectedly at the ground. It looked like she was the one who had pressed against my shoulder. Like maybe our bodies were bumping up against each other.

"Something wrong?"

Maybe the seat was too small for her?

But Myusel only said, “It’s... nothing. It’s nothing,” in a very quiet voice. I couldn’t shake the sense that her cheeks were just slightly red. Feeling like it wouldn’t be quite right to pursue the subject any further, though, I fell silent.

“Oh ho!” Zahar said a moment later. “It’s starting!” I turned my gaze to the soccer field, below us and beyond the glass.

All eight teams were arranged neatly on the field, facing the viewing box. They were about to pay homage to the empress.

The knights’ team.

The JSDF team.

The elf student team.

The dwarf student team.

Two human student teams.

The mixed team that Elvia was on.

And then, finally, the lizardman team.

“Gosh... I think the JSDF is at a pretty serious disadvantage here,” I mumbled.

All of the Eldant teams, to a greater or lesser extent, could probably use magic. The Japanese self-defense forces, however, could not. What were they going to do about a volley of kicks that looked like they came straight out of some manga? True, Minori-san was on the JSDF squad, and she had witnessed the “magic soccer” of the elves and dwarves firsthand, so maybe she had been able to help them come up with a strategy...

“You might be surprised. It seems the odds rather favor the JSDF team,” Matoba-san said blandly from behind me. “They come from the home of soccer, after all.”

Yeah, great. That didn’t make them pro soccer players or whatever. It sounded like that swindle where a guy says “I’m with the fire department” and then tries to get you to buy a fire extinguisher.

“Hang on just a second. Did you say ‘the odds’?”

“Yes,” Matoba-san replied calmly. “There’s quite a bit of betting going on already regarding which team will be victorious.”

I almost choked. This was the first official soccer game here, and people were *already* gambling on it?!

“Bear in mind that there’s no law to prevent betting on a soccer game in this world,” Matoba-san said. “As such, none of us, including myself, are in

a position to condemn such behavior."

"Ugh! Could you sound any more bureaucratic?"

"I may remind you that I am a bureaucrat." My remark didn't appear to move him.

I'll just bet he had money on at least one of the teams...

"Oh, look," Matoba-san said. "It's starting. There's Koganuma-kun."

The JSDF team had been chosen to lead the others in opening the game. (Was that because they came from the "home of soccer," too?) Minori-san took a step forward and raised one hand.

"The Players' Oath!" she declared, and players from the other teams followed her lead. "We players swear to honor the true spirit of sportsmanship, respecting and abiding by the rules of the game—"

And so on and so forth; but I had serious doubts that everyone there understood what the rules of the game actually were.

In any event, Minori-san led the players through the rest of the oath. Then Garius rose.

"Very good," he said, speaking into a microphone we had borrowed from the JSDF. "In the name of Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, let the first game begin!"

Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!

The entire stadium erupted. (This time I'm speaking metaphorically.)

Naturally, the people of the empire didn't really know what sports were, and they didn't know what kind of contest they could expect from this "soccer." But they clearly knew it was almost like a festival, something to celebrate. I looked out over the stands and saw that the people way down in the general seats, along with those up higher in the special seats, were all leaning forward, their eyes shining, ready for some soccer.

I let out a little sigh. *Let the chips fall where they may...*

We had come this far. All we could do now was see what happened.

The speed was incredible. The projectile reminded me less of a soccer

ball and more of a bullet tearing through the air. It goes without saying that this was not something an unaided human body could intercept. All the JSDF team could do, standing there in their dark-green uniforms, was watch in stupefaction as the ball went hurtling past them and into the goal.

Thud.

Honest to God, I could practically see the sound effect.

I think that ball might actually have broken the sound barrier. Naturally, it tore the net out of the goal, then went straight on toward the spectator seating. But if there was one thing you could have faith in, it was a wall designed and built by dwarf engineers and the JSDF. It held firm as the bullet-like ball slammed into it, and there was no further incident.

The ashen faces of the JSDF players were visible even from this distance. If the goalkeeper thoughtlessly tried to block a shot like that, there was no guarantee they would survive.

The knights' team, on the other hand, seemed practically overjoyed.

"Did you see that?!" they were exclaiming from their bench. "This is the very specialty of the First Knights!" Standing by the bench was a collection of men and women in robes that made them look very much like wizards. Apparently, they were using magic...

Suddenly, I heard two voices from just behind me.

"My goodness! An overwhelming opening gambit!"

"So it would seem."

I jerked my head around and saw Matoba-san and Prime Minister Zahar standing with microphones in their hands.

When did they get those?!

The Prime Minister stood alone, but Matoba-san was accompanied by a member of the Royal Guard, who was interpreting everything he said. This wasn't because the man spoke Japanese; he simply took the understanding granted to him by his magic ring and repeated it verbatim. The rings were only good for one-on-one interactions; they wouldn't help the people in the stands understand Matoba-san's words as they were broadcast through the microphone. That was why "interpreting" like this was necessary.

Apparently the two old men (plus one interpreter) intended to commentate the soccer game. I didn't recall making these preparations...

“The Jay Ess Dee Eff team seems quite stunned.”

“Well, I doubt they’ve ever experienced a ball traveling faster than the speed of sound before.”

“Tell me, don’t you use magic back in your country?”

“No, I’m afraid we don’t. We had to permit the use of magic here, though, in light of the beast people’s tremendous physical and athletic abilities.”

“Certainly. What else could you do?”

They sounded as if they weren’t even involved. Which, I guess, they weren’t really.

“Erm... It seems rather one-sided,” Petralka muttered.

In just a brief period, the knights’ team had scored a whole ten points. I guess that’s what happens when your kickoffs blast straight from the kicker to the goal. On the rare occasions when the JSDF managed to get a foot on the ball, they would be slammed in the face with wind magic, and the opposing team would pluck the ball away from them. The Japanese armed forces were as helpless as babes.

This was all exactly what I had been worried about. There was a real question of whether it was acceptable for the wizards to “play” from the bench. Strictly speaking, they weren’t directly involved in the game. Even those hyper-speed kicks were only facilitated by “tunnels” of acceleration magic the wizards laid down; it was the knights on the field who actually kicked the ball.

“This Jay Ess Dee Eff of yours is not so impressive after all,” Petralka said, sounding disappointed.

“They’re, uh, considered pretty impressive by human standards,” I answered, a bit put out. This was soccer beyond anything a person from Earth could imagine. We could have put a World Cup team on that field and they would have had problems. The JSDF squad was composed of guys who knew about soccer, but they weren’t pros or anything.

The commentary continued as these thoughts ran through my head.

“Ooh! Something appears to be happening on the JSDF team.”

“What could it be? Several of them have—what are those?”

I didn’t know exactly what was going on, but Matoba-san sounded excited. In fact, he was about as happy as I had ever heard him. He had a pair of binoculars in one hand and was looking down at the field.

“Koganuma has her 9mm out! She’s drawn her pistol!”

“.....What?”

Maybe I misheard him. Because I’m sure he didn’t just say...

“Oh ho! Perhaps inspired by Koganuma, the other JSDF players have drawn their Type 89s! That’s a small automatic weapon which—”

“Guh?!”

They have their guns out and you’re doing commentary*?! How did they even get in here with those?!*

I was just about to cut in on Matoba-san’s narration when—

brrraaaaappppppp!!

The air was filled with the sound of small-arms fire.

Now, to be clear, even a small-caliber gun is still a gun, and it makes a serious noise, but after hearing the ball fly around at subsonic speeds, this was really nothing.

A Type 89 is fully automatic. Technically it’s an assault rifle, but it has an automatic firing mode like a machine gun. You can just hold down the trigger and it’ll spit out ten rounds a second, a shower of 5.56mm bullets.

But come on—!

“Incredible! This is incredible! The JSDF is meeting the oncoming soccer ball with a hail of Type 89 fire!”

“Say *what*?!” I exclaimed.

I looked at the field, and that was exactly what was happening. The ball came flying at the speed of sound, and the army people shot at it with their rifles. Minori-san alone had her 9mm pistol out, but in the rain of bullets it didn’t make much difference.

Now, you might think that a hail of small-arms fire would lead to one deflated soccer ball. And you would be right.

Normally.

It appeared that a magical barrier of some sort was protecting the ball (it must have been, or the ball would have exploded every time it was kicked), and none of the shots succeeded in striking their target.

Gunfire, however, is still gunfire. The kinetic energy of a wall of bullets traveling three times the speed of sound, impacting the ball again and again, had to have some sort of effect. The ball was ever so slightly diverted on its

course.

Thud.

It was the same sound the ball had made earlier, but rather than flying into the goal, it lofted high into the air, over the wall protecting the spectator seating. A collective exclamation rose from the crowd.

Oooooh!

The spectators might not have been able to explain the nuances of the game, but they already grasped that the point was to kick the ball into the opposing team's goal. They also understood that the JSDF, which had been at the mercy of the knights until that moment, had just found a way to fight back.

"Did you see that?" Minori-san exclaimed, throwing her arms up in excitement. "The JSDF isn't so powerless after all!"

Microphones all around the stadium picked up and broadcast her voice. This Minori-san was nothing like the laid-back, warm and fuzzy girl I knew. Or maybe this was the real her...

"At last, the armed forces succeed in defending! Amazing," Matoba-san said, sounding practically excited.

I mean, I guess it was amazing... in a sense. Full-auto weapons or no, hitting an object traveling at practically the speed of sound was no mean feat. So, yes, amazing! Sure!

"Master?" Myusel looked at me, probably wondering why I suddenly had my head in my hands. "Is something the matter?"

"No," I muttered, "nothing at all."

What the heck was this? It wasn't soccer.

Normally the use of weapons like that would be totally inexcusable, but insofar as their opponents had magic and the JSDF had no way to fight back against it, who could say it was unfair for them to pull out their guns?

"Now it seems the royal knights are really getting into it," Zahar remarked.

"Indeed it does," Matoba-san responded. "Oh! What's this? One of the knights is—flying?"

A member of the opposing team had jumped straight into the air, almost ten meters off the ground. Magic again, no doubt. What was more, the ball floated up along with him.

"A high-jump shot?!" Matoba-san exclaimed. "Incredible! Astonishing! A veritable meteor strike!"

Boy, he really is enjoying himself.

Right at that moment, though, I didn't have the time to appreciate discovering this unexpected side of the old bureaucrat. The floating knight executed a bicycle kick, and now the ball wasn't just traveling at an ungodly speed, it was coming down from overhead. The JSDF had no answer.

"Ah, but what's this? The knights' team has overreached itself! He's lost control—the ball is going to miss!!"

And so it happened: maybe shooting from midair was too much to ask, because the ball missed the goal, slamming into the ground just in front of the net and bouncing way back up into the air.

"Say! What's that? Has the JSDF team just thrown something? Is that a hand grenade?"

No sooner had Matoba-san spoken than the grenade exploded in midair.

The force of the blast pushed the ball back down to the ground, where a waiting JSDF trooper started dribbling it. The wizards on the bench began intoning spells to throw up obstacles, but a flashbang from the armed-forces team interrupted them. The mages couldn't aim their spells when they couldn't see.

And so, at last, the JSDF scored their first goal.

"How about that?!" Minori-san howled.

"And the JSDF puts its first point on the board!" Matoba-san said.

"Will this turn the tide of the game?"

"It's always possible."

Yeah, maybe, but the knights still had a definite advantage, and they were quick to seize the initiative again.

"Goodness! That burst of wind magic has blown away the JSDF players! Surely that's against the rules?"

"Ah, but the wizards weren't targeting the JSDF troops, only their 'eighty-nines.'"

Basically, when the troops were about to fire, the wizards released wind

magic and scattered them. Naturally, the mages weren't players themselves, and since they were technically aiming for the Type 89s the JSDF squad was holding, not the players as such, they shouldn't get yellow or red cards. That appeared to be the logic, anyway.

The result of this little strategy was that an already serious score deficit only got bigger...

...and bigger...

"Now, what's this?" Matoba-san said. "Has there been a breakdown on the JSDF team?"

"They appear to be arguing about something," Zahar said.

For some reason, we couldn't hear what the team was saying; maybe the mics weren't in the right place. I could see Minori-san, looking as crazy as the day Elvia had stolen her golden ball, shouting and being restrained by her fellow players. Given the way she was looking, she was probably trying to bring a tank onto the field, or an RPG or something.

Not that I didn't sympathize with her... a lot.

"Right, things seem to have settled down among the Jay Ess Dee Eff team."

"Yes, they've calmed down the member who was making a scene. Our armed forces certainly exemplify restraint and endurance."

"I'm sure I don't know what she wanted, but I'm glad she's come to her senses."

"The JSDF is very much recognized for its discipline. They must always be in control of themselves."

I wasn't sure how I felt about Matoba-san waxing proud about the group that had tried to kill me. But hey, better keep it to myself.

The first game ended with victory going to the First Knights, while I was still trying to fathom what had happened.

So the first game, between the knights and the JSDF, turned out to be totally outrageous. You could hardly even call it soccer. What was it? Don't ask me. No question, though, any soccer-type person who saw what I had just seen might well faint clean away. But it could have been worse—as the

second game proved.

"Goodness! The dwarf team appears to be using some sort of new magical tactic!"

"Ahh. That's a clay puppet. A standard dwarf spell."

"Yes, but marionette or no, doesn't this make twelve people on the field? And that's against the—Wait! Did he climb in? Did he just *climb in*?!"

"Indeed he did."

"A dwarf has just entered the clay puppet as if he were being sucked inside! Are they trying to suggest that this brings them back down to eleven players?!"

No words. I had no words.

The short-legged dwarves were at a natural disadvantage against the tall, sinewy elves. Apparently, their plan was to use earthen marionettes—essentially, golems—to even the field, almost as if they were donning powered exoskeletons. Before I knew what was happening, eleven clay giants, each nearly three meters tall, were standing on the field. The bodies basically looked like oversized dwarves, but they didn't have heads; instead, a dwarf would ride in them, the top half of the pilot sticking out where the head should be. All I could do was stare.

And their opponents' response?

"The elf team is doing something—oh! What's that?"

"It's large-scale magic. An enlarged version of *tifu murottsu*. Ho! They've succeeded in blowing over the clay puppets."

"The huge surface area of those suits makes them especially vulnerable to those gale-force winds."

The elves had brought wind magic to bear as if it were a hail of bullets.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" The high-pitched laugh came from the elf team captain, Loek. "Your ugly little dolls are nothing but trash for our wind sprites to blow away!"

The wind was invisible but unmissable, gusting everywhere. It caused the dwarves' golems to weave drunkenly from side to side. It was like Matoba-san said: their huge size made them easy targets. (I can hear some design otaku now: "I *told* you humanoid weapons would be at a distinct disadvantage!") And it's true, most weapons are built to have a slim profile in order to reduce vulnerable front surface area. From that perspective, a giant humanoid is sort of asking for it.

Romilda, however, was unimpressed. “We won’t lose to *youuuuu*!” she bellowed.

The clay giants slumped to the ground as if exhausted, down on all fours—but that was also the same pose dwarves used when casting magic.

“Aha! The dwarf team appears to be building a barrier to protect against the wind!”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s all they’re doing.”

“Oh my goodness! They’re turning the soccer field into a maze! And does it feel a little more slanted than usual to you? Look! The ball is rolling toward the elf goal!”

Yep: the color commentators were right. The dwarves had built some sort of labyrinth structure to ward off the elves’ wind attack—and by tilting it, they could cause the ball to roll toward the other team’s goal of its own accord.

What strategy! Dwarves may not look like much for battle-planning, and yet here on this field—!

Okay, forget it.

I knew it was a little late to be complaining, but this wasn’t soccer anymore. It wasn’t anything.

Not that the elves were ones to complain. Or anyone, for that matter. In fact...

“Ahh, so that’s how it’s to be! Most interesting!”

“So it is. A great many of their tactics would be highly applicable on the battlefield. This has indeed been a useful exercise.”

“Oh—Master! Master! The elves stopped the ball.”

Petralka, Garius, and Myusel—in short, everyone around me—were enjoying the spectacle immensely. I could hardly jump up, flip over a table, and exclaim, “This isn’t soccer!!” Not least because there weren’t any tables here.

And at last...

“The game is over! What a truly, profoundly close contest, but that final push gave the dwarves the victory!”

“The home-field advantage is one thing, but taking advantage *of* the field—that’s something else!”

This was live commentary? Two old men jabbering and making bad puns?

I finally resolved to stop worrying and love this bomb.

Every cloud has a silver lining, they say, and every bitter trial has an end...

Okay, so this wasn't anything that dramatic, but eventually enough mind-spinning games went by that it was time for lunch. Sweet, sweet lunch.

As she promised, Myusel had brought a packed meal for me. She made delicious food. It's like... most heroines in manga and light novels are bad cooks, but I remembered my dad, a light novel author himself, saying that that was mostly so they could get an episode of easy laughs out of putting her in the kitchen. Myusel, for one, didn't fit the stereotype. Her stuff was seriously good.

Granted, during my time as a home security guard, I pretty much had two food groups: junk food, and my mom's cooking. So I didn't exactly have the world's most refined palate.

"Here you are, Master," Myusel said, holding out a basket to me.

Hm?

We were still in Petralka's viewing box, but something felt off. Myusel had made me lunches before, but it was unusual for her to simply pass me a basket without opening the top. Normally, she was so into these packed lunches that it seemed like she would practically have spooned the food into my mouth if I asked; she always opened the basket and sometimes even set the food out on place mats.

Did she want me to open the basket myself this time? I took it from her, somewhat perplexed.

"Wha...?"

I froze, and my eyes went wide. There was something very familiar there. Very familiar, and yet something I had gone a very long time without.

"Are these... onigiri?" And they were: little triangular rice balls. They were even wrapped in *nori*, just like they were supposed to be.

Close inspection revealed small differences in size and shape from one to the next; obviously, Myusel had hand-made them. I mean, that made

sense, but how in the world did she—?

"Myusel?"

"I see you're surprised, Master," she said shyly, her cheeks flushed. "I asked Minori-sama to share some 'rice'..."

I took another look at the onigiri.

Of course I knew that the JSDF troops sometimes imported things from Japan, including favorite foods. And yes, I had sometimes remarked how nice that was at breakfast, when Myusel would have heard me. But I never once expected her to take it to heart, then go out of her way to get Minori-san to bring her some rice. I assumed Minori-san had also taught her both how to cook the rice and how to make the rice balls. All just so I could have onigiri for lunch.

And she had managed to keep it all a secret from me. Where in the world had she found the time? It must have demanded so much work...!

"Er... Master?" A cloud of anxiety passed over Myusel's face. "I'm... I'm very sorry for hiding it from you, sir. But... I just..." She sounded worried, almost panicked. She must have interpreted my shocked silence as anger.

I clenched my fist and exclaimed, "Don't apologize!"

"Eep!"

"I'm moved beyond words right now!"

"Er... Ah?" She blinked her big, emerald eyes.

I took her hand and exclaimed further, "Myusel—you formed these onigiri with your delicate, graceful fingers, worked your very heart and soul into them! It's wonderful!"

"Er... Ahem... And that makes you... happy with me, Master?"

"Absolutely!" I insisted. How could I not insist? "You must understand! The heroine's hand-made *o-bentou* is a rite of passage in every romantic comedy, a standard trope not to be denied, an event as inevitable as the rising of the sun! And what does she make the hero? A sandwich is okay, but *my* heroine—! She chose onigiri! Made by hand, yes, by her very own hands! The rice caressed by her fingers, as if they, by proxy, were touching my very tongue! Such care should never be less than completely respected! *Banzai*, Japanese food!"

"Th-Thank you." For some reason, Myusel seemed just a touch hesitant, but she smiled.

As for me, I picked up an onigiri and put it in my mouth, soaking in the thousand feelings it evoked. There was an instant where I worried there might be some bizarre twist, like maybe she had used sugar instead of salt, or maybe there was caramel in the middle or something, but it was filled with minced fish, just like it was supposed to be.

Wonderful!

"D-Do you like it?"

"Ah lahb ih," I said. I was devouring the rice balls like a starving child.

It had been close to a year since I had had rice. Myusel's cooking didn't leave much to be desired, but I was still Japanese, and there was nothing more familiar and comforting to me than that soft, white staple.

"We do not quite understand. Is this some foodstuff from Shinichi's country?" Petralka asked, peeking into the basket. She had disembarked from my knees and was eating a full-course meal prepared by her personal chef, but it looked like my intense emotion had attracted her attention.

"It is," Myusel answered. I was too busy eating to say anything. "Minori-sama taught me how to make it, and then I prepared it."

"Mm. If it so pleases Shinichi, we are most eager to taste it as well."

"Ah, Your Majesty may certainly—"

"Have one? So we shall." Petralka grabbed an onigiri.

I noticed that these rice balls were a little on the large side. Since this was Myusel's first time making them, she probably found it easier to get the shape right that way.

"Hrm. And one eats them with one's bare hands?"

"That's what Minori-sama told me, yes."

"Most intriguing..."

Having never tried onigiri before, Petralka seemed a little hesitant. She picked up one of the balls of rice with both hands, as if afraid of dropping it.

"A very strange object indeed," she said, but she took a little bite, chewing off one corner of the triangular onigiri.

D'awwww...!

A little, silver-haired girl holding an onigiri in both hands...

Taking a sweet, tiny nibble of one corner...

It's like she has a dang moe checklist, and she's ticking the boxes one by one! So cute!

Between the emotion evoked by Myusel's rice balls and the moe-ness of the way Petralka was eating them, I was very busy.

"Ahh. How interesting. This is entirely different from bread, and yet the rich, chewy texture is—*nom nom*."

I guess Petralka liked the rice ball, because she ate the rest of it with gusto. Maybe she thought she was supposed to eat it like I was, because she took big, indiscriminate bites, getting rice all over her mouth.

"Oh, Your Majesty. Your honorable face..." Myusel pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. "Just let me—"

"No, don't!"

My unexpected shout brought a squeak from the maid.

Staring fixedly at the rice on Petralka's cheek, I said, "Wiping it off with a handkerchief would be completely unacceptable! When a beautiful young woman has a bit of onigiri on her cheek, you say, 'There's a few grains on your cheek...' and pluck it gently away and eat it! This is basic!"

"Beautiful young woman—?" Petralka said, blinking in confusion. "D-Do you refer to us?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I do! Listen to me! You have to recognize that you *are* a beautiful young woman, and behave accordingly! You must respect yourself enough not to let anyone do something so crassly wasteful as to wipe rice off your face with a mere handkerchief!"

I had become so agitated that even I wasn't sure what I was saying anymore, but the sincerity of my emotions came through. I hoped.

"Erm... Yes. We do not fully understand, but very well," Petralka said. "In—In that case, Shinichi, you shall remove it."

I snapped back to reality. "What?"

Me? She wanted me *to do it? To take the rice off her cheek? And eat it? MAJI DE??*

Wait... Was I getting so agitated that I was thinking in Japanese? Heck, that wasn't even actual Japanese, it was romaji!

But forget the self-flagellation.

"Er... ahem."

"Is this not how things are done in your country?"

"Uh... I mean, yes, sort of..."

I could see now that the rice on Petralka's cheek was stuck right next to her pale-pink lips.

Ack! This is suuuper-duper almost a kiss!

"Are you trying to tell us that you cannot eat an object that was stuck to our cheek?"

"Not in the least, Majesty..."

"Then remove it!" Petralka commanded. Then she closed her eyes and stuck out her face. She almost looked like she was getting ready for a kiss, and it was impossibly cute.

Calm down, O my heart! Ahhhhh! But— But—!

Petralka opened one eye. "Will you not do it quickly?" she asked. "Why are you shaking? Your embarrassment—although we don't know why you should be embarrassed—is nearly contagious!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" I exclaimed, unconsciously straightening up. I reached out, pulled the rice off her cheek, and—

Ate it. I actually ate it.

Yaaaaaaahhhhh?!

How do I put this? It tasted just like rice always tastes, but it was also—hmmm. As if I had crossed some culinary Rubicon. This was probably how Adam and Eve felt when they ate the fruit of knowledge.

Father! Mother! Today I take another step on the path to manhood...!

Knowing my parents, they would have just said something like "Good work, that's one flag down." But whatever.

"Mm," Petralka said, opening her eyes and nodding. "Tell us, Shinichi. Is this ritual always performed by men?"

"Er, no. In fact, it's usually the other way around."

"Then we shall perform it as well."

"I'm... I'm sorry?"

"Shinichi. There is rice on your cheek, too."

I caught my breath.

OMG! Kanou Shinichi—could you ever have been prepared for this?!

I stiffened as Petralka reached for my cheek and plucked off a grain of rice. The brush of her white fingers was almost like a caress... *Ahhh.*

"Hrm. A most unusual custom," Petralka said. She popped the rice in her mouth without hesitation. "It makes one rather... bashful." And then the empress smiled shyly.

No fair! Super no fair!

The whole thing was like throwing gasoline on the moe fire of my heart.

To think that I, who once held that “the third dimension is just for show; the brass doesn’t... (you know the rest)”—to think that I should reach such a pulse-pounding point in a relationship with a 3-D girl!

“Shinichi. You still have rice stuck to your cheek.”

Who should approach me as I was thinking all this, take the rice off my cheek, and eat it but... Garius?!

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!

“Hm, I see,” he said with an easy smile. “What a deeply intriguing custom.”

I remained completely stiff.

No! Crud! I should have thought of the possibility that Garius would get in on this! But I got so moe over Petralka’s totally unfair behavior—how was I supposed to think?! (Note: rhetorical question.)

You've something on your cheek.
Oh...
EEYIKES!
WHOA
SOOOO CUUUUTE!
Your embarrassment is contagious!

“Err... Um...” I rose from my seat as if I were about to run away. “I, uh, I’ve got to... use the bathroom!”

It was a half-baked excuse for leaving in the middle of a meal, but it got me out of the viewing box.

Danger! Danger, Shinichi!

Garius wasn’t a bad guy by any means, and along with Petralka he was one of my staunchest supporters. But I just didn’t have any interest in same-sex romance. Having another guy touch my cheek, or eat the rice he plucked off it... I just couldn’t get moe about that.

I felt like I had eaten the sweetest candy and then been forced to swallow the hottest pepper—they pretty much canceled each other out.

“Aw...” I sighed as I walked down the hallway. Maybe I really should go use the bathroom. Obviously there were no sewers or indoor plumbing around here, but they did have clay pots full of nice, clean water that you could use to wash your hands. I could rinse my face, cool down a little...

But then, I stopped. “Huh?”

I thought I heard a voice I recognized. They were talking to someone. Indistinct chatter, not very loud, but the conversation sounded strained.

Curious, I went in the direction of the voices, and found I could hear them more clearly.

“Husband, does that time still—?”

There was silence in response.

I peeked around the corner. Brooke and Cerise were standing nearby. The lizardman team’s prep room must be right around here.

“Everyone is hoping to see you out there,” Cerise said.

She sounded pleading, but after a pause Brooke replied only, “Tell them... I’m sorry.” And then he left her there, just like before. Cerise, standing all by herself in the hallway, looked terribly lonely.

“Ah.” Cerise looked up and met my eyes. “Shinichi-sama...”

“Er, uh, sorry, I didn’t mean to, uh—”

Cerise seemed oddly cold toward me. Maybe it was because every time we met, I appeared to be eavesdropping.

But she said, “Not at all. I’m the one who should apologize. You caught us at a most... unflattering moment.”

“You really don’t need to apologize,” I said. “Um...”

Brooke’s repeatedly giving her the cold shoulder was really starting to

bother me. This was twice now... In fact, including that very first time I'd seen them, it was three times.

"Are you guys fighting about something?" I asked quietly. "Is Brooke... I mean, is he unhappy working at my place?"

"No, certainly not," Cerise said, shaking her head. Lizardman expressions were, as ever, hard for me to read, but she seemed to be anxious to dispel any misunderstanding. She repeated *certainly not* again, and then hung her head.

So... what *was* going on?

Cerise seemed like a really heartfelt and decent person (even if she did bear a passing resemblance to Godzilla), so I wanted to do anything I could to help her.

"If there's anything I can do to help, just tell me," I said.

"I'm sorry?" Cerise asked.

"Er... I don't mean to butt in, of course," I said, embarrassed. "It's just... Brooke does a lot of good work for me, and I'm grateful for that. I want him to be happy."

She was silent.

"Maybe it's just me, but I feel like husbands and wives should get along. Maybe lizardmen don't see it that way, or maybe happiness means something else to you. Maybe I'm being self-indulgent. But the impression I get is that right now, you and Brooke... aren't very happy."

It was nice to live with someone else. Living alone—being by yourself when you were supposed to be with someone else—that was sad. I knew that from experience. That was why, if there was any way I could help reconcile Brooke and Cerise, I wanted to do it.

"Shinichi-sama..." Cerise looked at me for a moment. "Truth be told..."

And then she started talking about the past.

Cerise was the daughter of a powerful member of the Tribal Council—effectively, lizardman nobility. When she married Brooke, it was for chiefly political reasons. He was the lizardmen's greatest hero, after all. The feelings of the husband- and wife-to-be didn't really matter. Still, Cerise

and Brooke had known each other a long time, and she hardly disliked him, so she had no specific objection to the wedding.

Marriage in lizardman society, incidentally, has just one purpose: procreation.

Cerise told me that unlike mammals, lizardmen didn't have the same clear-cut division of labor when it came to childcare. That is to say, the mother didn't breast-feed, so it was easier for both husband and wife to look after the kids. The society's laissez-faire approach to child-rearing helped, too. The adoration humans displayed toward their offspring—hugging them, touching them, Eskimo-kissing them—wasn't really present with lizardmen.

These limited interactive behaviors were one of the reasons observers from other races called the lizardmen "cold-blooded" or claimed they didn't have emotions. Personally, I figured it was just a fact of biology, and not something to criticize.

But anyway, Brooke and Cerise got married, and she bore his children—or I guess, laid his eggs. Normally, they would have looked after the eggs together. But at the time, Brooke was still a member of the army of the Holy Eldant Empire. His whole race considered him a hero, and now that his marriage with Cerise had been consummated, he had no excuse for neglecting his military duties. When the call-up came, he couldn't ignore it. That was how he ended up going off to war, leaving his wife and eggs behind.

While he was away, his home was attacked by the Kingdom of Bahairam.

Since lizardmen were so low on the social ladder to begin with, they were often treated as pawns who could be deployed into occupied territory. In other words, they often lived in the hottest parts of every conflict zone. Cerise and Brooke's home was one such place.

Now, Cerise might have been female, but she was also a lizardman. She had considerably more toughness and fighting strength than the average human. Under normal circumstances, she might have been able to defend the eggs even without Brooke. But bad luck brought a further twist of the knife: when the attack came, Cerise was sick.

Their eggs were broken in the conflict.

If Brooke had been there, sturdy as he was, there was a good chance he

could have defended the eggs in Cerise's place. But he was on a battlefield far away, unable to protect his wife and "children."

"It's pained him ever since," Cerise said. "He says he has no right to be a father."

"But it wasn't his fault," I said. Anyone could see that.

"And yet he blames himself." Cerise looked at the ground. "And this... 'soccer.' The ball you use in this competition. Its size and pattern look very much like those of our eggs."

"Is... Is that what's been going on?" I asked, the realization slowly dawning on me.

Now I understood why Brooke had given the soccer ball such a long, strange look. It reminded him of the eggs he had been unable to protect. It was probably the same reason Cerise had looked at the ball the way she had. And with all that in his past, I had asked him to go out and play soccer?

"I can see why he wouldn't want to kick a soccer ball," I said. A game where you kicked a ball that looked just like one of your eggs? No wonder the lizardmen weren't eager to play.

But Cerise seemed surprised. "What? No... I don't think there's a problem with that."

"You... You don't?"

"No. In fact, lizardmen transport their eggs using their feet."

".....Huh?"

My eyes went wide. Cerise was kind enough to explain.

As one might guess from her remark that her eggs looked like soccer balls, lizardman eggs weren't quite the shape we associate with eggs. Instead, they were perfectly round. This, apparently, was because they had evolved to be easy for the parents to transport. Unlike human births, a clutch of lizardman eggs usually numbered three at the least, and averaged five to ten. If they needed to go anywhere with them—to keep them safe, say—they'd find that all the eggs wouldn't fit in their hands, and they could hardly put them in their mouths. The natural thing to do, then, was to roll the eggs along with their feet.

The eggs were apparently tough enough to put up with a little bit of kicking. I guess if kicking a soccer ball were inherently repulsive to the lizardmen, none of the others Brooke brought would have been willing to

participate, either.

"Wow. Everyone really does have their own customs, don't they?" People like me might be shocked to think about kicking an egg with your feet, but if humans were completely biologically different than we are, maybe it would seem natural to us, too. Heck, there are fish that raise their offspring in their mouths—and then there's the praying mantis. In order to be sure she has enough nutrients to lay her eggs, the female mantis eats the male mantis after they copulate.

People tend to react viscerally to this sort of thing: "That's weird!" or "How awful!" But that's just how we see it. A mantis, for example, is a totally different creature.

"Heh... So we're the same, when it comes down to it."

"I'm sorry?" Cerise said.

"Oh, no... It's just, our appearances and our ways of life are so different. I always thought Brooke was a good person, but there was a line in my mind separating me and him. He was a different kind of creature."

Brooke was Brooke. Not a human. Lizardmen weren't like us. That caused me to resign myself to certain things from the outset, to assume that there would naturally be little misunderstandings. I had given up on completely understanding him before I'd even tried.

"So often we see what's different, and it gives us an excuse to fight someone or keep our distance. But instead, we should be recognizing that even separate species share certain things. Then we might get along with them. I'd like that better."

What did humans and lizardmen share? Well, for one, Brooke was a father who cared for his offspring. I was sure he wasn't the only lizardman who felt that way. They didn't show it quite the way we did, and that caused humans to misunderstand them. Their obviously different appearance didn't give us many chances to reconcile that misunderstanding, either. It meant there was a deep and seemingly unbridgeable gap between us.

Cerise looked at me with unblinking eyes. Her tongue flitted in and out of her mouth. "Never have I heard a human speak in such a way," she said wonderingly.

"Er... I guess it helps to be an outworlder," I said with a shrug. "I get to stand outside of what seems like common sense in the Eldant Empire. But look, I'm not trying to destroy local customs or push my ideas down

people's throats here."

Cerise didn't speak.

"I'm the president and salesperson for Amutech. The most I can do is say 'What about this?' or 'Give it a try if you like.' I'm sorry that means I can't raise the lizardmen's status by sheer force."

Of course, to blindly affirm all the values of modern Japan would be dangerous itself. That was why I offered only suggestions, so as not to become a cultural invader. Maybe it might seem like I was evading responsibility, but in order to avoid forcing anything on anybody, making suggestions like "What if you tried thinking about it this way?" was the most I should—or could—do.

"Having said that, salesmanship does involve a certain amount of promotion."

"*Pro-mo-tion*, sir?"

"Meaning you don't force anything on your listeners, but you try to convince them that you've got a good idea."

"I suppose I don't... fully understand."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it." I gave a dry grin. Maybe this world wasn't quite ready for the niceties of marketing theory, humans and lizardmen alike.

I parted ways with Cerise and headed back, but at the turn in the hallway I ran into Myusel.

"Yikes!" She was the last person I had expected to see standing there.

"Master," she said. Her eyes were brimming, and she looked... well, she looked overwhelmed with emotion.

"Wh-What? Huh? What's going on?" I sputtered, totally confused. Honestly, it really hurt me to see Myusel cry.

But she said, "Oh, Master, you took so long to come back, and I—"

She must have gotten worried and come looking for me. True, I had been gone an awfully long time for someone who was ostensibly going to the bathroom.

"S-Sorry," I said. "I just ran into somebody."

“Yes, sir,” Myusel said with a firm nod. “Cerise-san, right?” It seemed she had heard me and Cerise talking, much as I had heard Cerise and Brooke talking.

Then Myusel said, “Master... Shinichi-sama. You’re truly, truly...” Her emotions seemed to overcome her again, and she was lost for words.

“Huh? What?”

“You are the strangest—no.” She shook her head. “The most wonderful... the kindest...”

“Gosh, what brought this on?”

I gathered that she was referring to my conversation with Cerise, but I didn’t think I had said anything to warrant a reaction like this.

“Lizardmen... half-elves... You treat us all just like normal humans,” she said.

“Oh...” I said, smiling sheepishly. “It’s nice of you to say that, but it’s really pretty normal back where I come from.”

I didn’t think I would be considered especially kind back on Earth, or especially unusual. It wasn’t some special trait of mine, just a product of where I had been born and raised.

“Do you mean the ‘liberty, equality, and fellowship’ that you spoke of before?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Those are values I was raised with. I’m just sort of, you know, the opposite of people who discriminate against lizardmen or half-elves. I assume the people who discriminate against you mostly do it because they were raised that way.”

Obviously, discrimination existed in my world, too. Humans were not all equal. They were born with different abilities and talents, raised in different environments, and that inevitably led to personal differences. If we were all exactly alike, we might be a lot more like ants or bees—a hive society with few individual distinctions. I found that sort of terrifying.

More than anything else, a society like that couldn’t produce manga, or anime, or light novels, or games. Something else my dad used to say was that being a creator meant trumpeting what made you different from other people.

My point is, this inequality among people caused some to try to make up for feelings of inadequacy by ridiculing those they saw as beneath them. It’s hardly an uncommon behavior, even in our world. Just look at the internet.

I have to think, though, that somewhere inside, people who do that feel guilty about it, that they regret it. I don't think anyone in our world genuinely sees that sort of ridicule as a good thing. But here in this world, they didn't see it as a bad one. Even the people being discriminated against considered it perfectly normal. That was why nobody considered changing things. It took someone from an entirely different world to even suggest it.

"So it's not something admirable about me," I said. "There are a lot of people in my world who worked hard to achieve those ideals. They're the ones you should admire. I'm just walking in their footsteps."

"I... I wonder," Myusel said. "But Matoba-san and Minori-san don't say the things you do."

"Well, they—I mean, not everyone is in a position to speak as freely as I am."

I could only smile ruefully. Public servants didn't have the same freedom to express themselves that I did. But trying to explain that to Myusel would probably just make things even more confusing.

"Look, all I'm saying is that I'm not this great person or anything. I wouldn't want you guys to make more of me than I am. But... it does make me happy to hear such kind words from you. Thank you."

"Oh... Not at all..." Myusel blushed and looked at the ground.

Gaah! Every time she does that, it's so innocent and cute!

"Ah, Shinichi-sama... I mean, Master," she quickly corrected herself. "We mustn't take too long..."

"Oh, you're right. Petralka's gonna be ticked." I smiled again, then Myusel and I set off walking down the hallway back toward the viewing box.

"Hey, Myusel," I said, stopping in my tracks. "I just thought of something. Do you think you could help me?"

"You want... my help?" She looked surprised, but then she said, "If it's within my power, I'll do anything. Just tell me... Shinichi-sama." Then she smiled.

The games seemed to be going smoothly—or at least, what passed for

smoothly. This being a tournament, obviously, the losing teams left, while the winning teams continued to play. One surprise was that both the elf and dwarf teams, despite their extensive use of magic, dropped out early, and even the mixed team with Elvia and her friends was eventually defeated.

Elves and dwarves being hereditary enemies as they were, the two teams had used every ounce of their strength in their game against each other, and when the next round came, they were too tired to put up a fight.

As for the mixed team, Elvia and the other beast people were really more interested in the ball itself than they were in doing much of anything with it. It actually didn't turn out to be much of a game, and ended with a critical self-inflicted wound by Elvia—specifically, when she kicked the ball into her own team's goal.

I had to admit, Elvia had never seemed entirely clear on the concept of soccer—or tournaments, for that matter. It probably didn't help that enough time had passed that her "phase of the moon" had come around again.

There wasn't much we could do about any of that now. If we ever did this again, maybe we could make some improvements.

We had come down to the final round, and I wasn't sure whether or not to be surprised by the two teams remaining. On the one hand, we had the First Knights. Humans, as basically the rulers of this world, had the best balance when it came to "fighting" in a group like this. I guess that was the same as saying humans were the best at making war, and I didn't know whether that was something to be proud of. But anyway...

The other team—and this really was a surprise—was the lizardmen. The main reason they had done so well seemed to be related to their custom of moving their eggs with their feet, as Cerise had explained. They had a long tradition of manipulating round objects with their feet...

When a bunch of kids who don't know much about the game play soccer, it's usually quick to devolve into something where everyone is making their most powerful kicks all the time, or shooting from absurdly long distances. I remembered doing that myself. And that was how the knights and the other teams had mostly played.

To be fair, the manga and stuff that had served as their examples definitely favored dramatic, last-ditch long shots and final-move-style craziness. Even the shots that weren't actually so long tended to be depicted in a way that made them seem to fly for miles before they landed in the

goal.

The knights, though, had magic on their side; magical support was something they were used to. It allowed them to get away with an otherwise childish strategy like taking lots of long shots.

By comparison, the lizardman team seemed practically gifted. They never made long passes, they tried to keep the ball as close to their feet as possible, and they used their inborn physical strength and athletic ability to move down the field and score. Some of their moves and tactics could have been taken for pro stuff.

"Most unexpected," Petralka said as she watched the final match begin. "Who would have imagined that the lizardmen would win through?"

"Very true, Your Majesty," Garius said, subtly but unmistakably surprised. "And here I had dismissed them as mere savages. I confess a certain nervousness watching this match."

"Yes. This may not be a proper battle, but the First Knights' reputation will not be bolstered if they lose to a group of lizardmen."

I sighed internally. *So that's what it's come to...*

No matter how much I urged them to forget about status and just enjoy the game, as long as there were winners and losers it would be impossible to completely ignore relations off the field. Privately, I had been rooting for the lizardmen, but I admit I never thought they would make it this far. And I definitely hadn't thought about the ramifications if they happened to be in a game against the knights—let alone if they won. If the knights had been knocked out in the first round, they might have been able to say, "Well, it's just a game." But each time they won, that possibility got more and more remote.

"Master..." Myusel tugged on my sleeve anxiously.

"I know," I muttered. "This is tense."

I was in a tough spot: I could hardly tell the lizardmen to throw the game. But if they won, the knights, as well as the humans in the audience—probably half the crowd—would be very, very angry. And if they obviously took it easy—if it was clear by comparison with their earlier performances that they were holding back—that would probably upset people, too.

Like I said, tough.

What to do, what to do? Well, one thing was certain: worrying about it now wouldn't help.

“No choice but to let this play out,” I said.

“Right...” Myusel nodded.

“Hm? What are you two whispering about?” The annoyingly sharp-eared Petralka said, looking over at us.

“Secret,” I said with a grin.

“Is it, now? What secrets could you have from your empress?”

“Hey, don’t worry, I promise we weren’t privately making fun of you or anything.”

“Ahem... That is not what we were concerned about,” she said, frowning. “We simply don’t like to be left out of the discussion.”

“Oh yeah? But I think it’s going to be more fun if you don’t know what we just said.”

“What?”

“Remember earlier, how happy I was to be surprised by those onigiri Myusel made? Not knowing ahead of time made me that much happier to find out.”

“Er... Yes, we see your logic,” Petralka muttered. “Well, all right. But we shall learn of this surprise in the course of this match, shall we not?”

“Yeah... you will,” I said. I gave her my most confident nod, but inside I was sweating bullets.

The competition between the knights and the lizardmen went... more or less as expected, I suppose. The knights had a huge advantage, and they used it.

For starters, they had magic on their side, which some might justifiably call cheating. The lizardmen couldn’t use magic and didn’t have any sympathetic wizards to back them up. And because everyone in the stadium knew that the knights’ reputation was on the line, the lizardmen seemed to be holding themselves back. They seemed to have realized that they must not win this game.

But just as I had predicted, the crowd didn’t react well to the lizardmen pulling their punches.

“Hrm. This is terribly boring,” Petralka said, a fair assessment of the

one-sided contest. At the moment, the lizardmen were down ten to nothing. A knightly win seemed almost inevitable.

"Your knights seem rather savage," Petralka commented.

"I suppose because it would be no laughing matter if they were simply handed victory," said Garius, the division's leader. He didn't look terribly pleased.

He was right: the lizardmen's reticence could all too easily be seen as them throwing the game. That might not be what the lizardmen intended, but the difficulty of understanding their gestures and expressions left people to read things into what they could see. The lizard squad was visibly slower and weaker than they had been; even an amateur could tell they weren't playing at their full strength.

"It is all too clear that the spectators are losing interest," Petralka said. "We understand that a lizardman victory might tarnish the dignity of the First Knights, but winning a game the other side isn't playing simply makes them look ridiculous."

The lizardmen were caught in a paradox: they couldn't hold back, but they weren't allowed to win. As a group, they didn't seem delicate enough to walk a tightrope like that.

It looks like I've got no choice but to intervene.

I didn't set up this tournament because I was desperate to see some soccer here in the Eldant Empire. Soccer fans might be upset to hear this, but I didn't particularly care about the game one way or the other. I was just trying to lay the foundation for people to understand what made sports so much fun, and maybe take the edge off interracial relations while I did it. So while I wasn't going to fix a match, maybe I could be forgiven for trying to encourage one team or another.

I couldn't forget what my goal was.

Silently, I met Myusel's gaze. She gave a little nod, and together we slipped out of the viewing box.

What follows is essentially an account Brooke gave me later of what happened. So although I'm relating it in first person, the viewpoint is really

his.

Without further ado...

Brooke was on the lizardman team's bench.

Cerise, along with Brooke's other friends, had urged him repeatedly to be there, and even I had asked him to be part of the squad, and that explained why he was sitting there. He, however, had no desire whatsoever to be out on the field; as far as he was concerned, he was only there in case anyone else couldn't play and they needed a replacement.

So when the voices of Matoba-san (and his interpreter) and Prime Minister Zahar came over the speakers the JSDF had installed, announcing, "The lizardman team looks like they're going to switch out a player!" Brooke didn't imagine for a moment it had anything to do with him. For him, the commentary was hardly distinguishable from the general roar of the stadium.

Until he heard...

"The lizardman team is making a substitution! In place of Gayle Drood, Brooke Darwin will be taking the field!"

Brooke gave a start at the sound of his name. When he looked up, Gayle was already back at the bench, patting Brooke on the shoulder. As it happened, Gayle was someone Brooke had known since his military days—in effect, an old war buddy.

"What is this, Gayle?"

"Orders from the Tribal Council's representative. Hit the field."

"*Whose* representative?" That meant the command came from the person acting on behalf of the Tribal Council. In this case... Cerise.

"You're Brooke the Hero. When you were of a mind, you could lead us toe-to-toe against a division of knights. If you go out there as if we're gonna slaughter them... we will." Gayle's tongue slipped in and out of his mouth. "Do us a favor. Don't forget what you mean to us."

Brooke stood silently and made for the field. He knew, of course, what they called him. *Hero*. He understood that his presence would dramatically raise the morale of his teammates.

And to him, that knowledge was a huge burden.

He had failed to protect even his own eggs. What kind of hero was he?

Yes, there was meaning in bringing glory to his people, advancing their

station. Or there had been. But to Brooke, it was cold comfort. There were certain things that were all too clear to him, exactly because he was a "hero," a hardened soldier. He knew, for instance, that no soldier could go on forever. Every man of arms would one day grow old, weaken, and die. Hence, to ensure his existence was not in vain, he sought to leave children behind him, a link to the next generation. Wasn't that what all living creatures wanted?

But in this, the most basic task of life, he had failed. He had let the word *hero* carry him away, off to the front lines... And as a result, he had been unable to defend his wife and clutch. The simplest of things.

He was a fool. That was the thought that caused him to quit soldiering. To distance himself from his wife. He didn't believe that a fool like him had any right to ask Cerise to bear his eggs again. Cerise was still young. She would be happier bearing the offspring of some other, better man. He was so sure of this that even when Cerise pursued him repeatedly, he cruelly rebuffed her.

It was only right that this should be his fate: to die old and useless and alone.

That was why he couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for this game, no matter how much people might want him to.

Those were the thoughts swirling in his mind as he stepped silently out onto the soccer field.

The air was impossibly heavy. There was no more cheering from the crowd; instead, they were looking venomously at the disappointment that was the lizardman team. Lizardmen might not have pronounced facial expressions themselves, but that didn't mean they were oblivious to what humans were feeling. The contest had been so lopsided that the knights were far, far ahead in goals.

The lizardman had the kickoff.

"Brooke..."

"The hero..."

The beseeching gazes of his teammates pierced him. He walked between them, some to his right and some to his left, until he was standing in front of the ball. He still had no desire to play, but if all he had to do was kick this thing straight ahead, he would manage it.

He drew his foot back and—

“Brooke!” a familiar voice called. It was coming from the stands.

He looked back, and there was Cerise. Myusel was with her. It was his wife who had called his name.

“Brooke-saaaan!” Myusel yelled. He hadn’t suspected the demure girl of having such a strong pair of lungs. “The ball! The ball is one of your eggs —one of the ones you couldn’t save!”

This took him completely aback. He stared down at the ball in front of him. What did Myusel think she was saying?

“Brooke!” Cerise’s voice cut through his confusion. “This is your chance to take it to a safe place!”

Still he said nothing. It was not a real egg, of course. Yes, the size and appearance were quite similar, but this was something else completely. Brooke knew that. The eggs he had lost... those had been real eggs. They were gone, and he would never get them back.

And yet...

Ahh. I think I see now, Brooke thought. He had been unable to forgive himself because he could have protected his eggs, but hadn’t. He could not bring himself to say, as Cerise did, that it was what it was.

Yet all of that hinged on a hypothetical world. If he hadn’t been at war, would he have been able to protect his eggs? Maybe, maybe not. There was no way of knowing. The eggs were gone, and there was no changing that.

No amount of self-recrimination would undo what he had done, but neither could he forget it all and go back to the way things had been. So instead, he had cut himself off from Cerise and everyone he knew.

But...

“This—”

This ball, here in front of him.

The eggs he had been unable to protect so long ago.

Well, then he would test himself, here and now. He would see whether he was truly fit to be called a hero. Whether he could protect *this* egg.

Perhaps then he would be able to accept all of it.

“Listen up, you lot,” he growled, staring intently at the ball. “We’re going to give it everything we’ve got.”

“Yessir!” A joyous cheer went up from the lizardmen.

“Ssssssshhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaa!” Brooke raised the unique lizardman war cry and kicked the ball.

The course of the game changed almost immediately. And Brooke was the reason.

With their hero on the field, and with that yell reminding them of what a soldier he used to be, the lizardman morale skyrocketed. Suddenly, they were at the top of their game.

There was no more hesitation. If they managed an upset victory against the knights, there was a chance it would turn people against them even more. But they didn't seem to care. They were ready for anything. With that mindset, the lizardmen's athletic prowess turned out to be a match even for that of the beast people.

"Incredible! Amazing! This is absolutely unbelievable!" Matoba-san was caught up in paroxysms of excitement. "He got through! Three defenders! Four! Five! The knights just can't get the ball back!"

He was right: while Brooke dribbled, all the other lizardmen deftly covered the knights, keeping them at bay. The royal forces were so used to shooting the ball from a distance that when the lizardmen got up in their faces, they didn't seem to know what to do.

And Brooke kept running, the ball safely at his feet. It almost seemed glued to his toes. It didn't bounce. It didn't jump. It didn't get away from him for an instant. Several of the knights' players managed to slip around their guards and throw themselves at Brooke, but he dodged them without so much as blinking. Compared to rolling an egg, handling a soccer ball was easy work for the likes of Brooke and his people.

"Don't look now, but a wall has been thrown up in front of Brooke!"

Magic from the knights' side—the same stuff the dwarves had used—created a wall that was blocking Brooke's progress. But he showed he could do more than go in a straight line: he dodged the wall neatly, and casually resumed running.

More knights launched themselves at him, but they failed to get anywhere near the ball.

"Goodness gracious, what's this?! Have the knights gotten desperate?"

What the knights came up with next, believe it or not, was offensive magic.

"I have to imagine that directly attacking another player would be grounds for a red card..." Matoba-san said.

"Yes, but they aren't targeting the player," Zahar replied. "Most likely, they're aiming for the ball."

"The ball! Brilliant! In soccer, you would never get a red card for

abusing the ball!”

Well, no. Abusing the soccer ball is sort of the point.

The knights must have hoped they could land an explosion or something close enough to the ball (which was to say, close enough to Brooke) that they would be able to pluck it right away from him. One slight miscalculation would result in an attack on Brooke and a red card, but the palace mages working with the knights knew how to make their magic very accurate, how to focus its power in a single place.

“Sssssshhhhhhaaaaaaaaaa!”

It turned out even magical attacks couldn’t stop Brooke. He dodged to the right, to the left. He dribbled the ball neatly past every obstacle.

“This! Is! My! Egg!” he bellowed.

There was no one ahead of him. Perhaps he was saying it to himself.

“I will never!” He ducked another explosion. “Again!” He dodged past an earthen redoubt in his way. “Let it be broken!” He spun around several knights who came flying at him. “I will protect it!” He couldn’t take a straight line, but step by step he was gaining ground.

His shouting, fired by the fury and passion within him, carried clearly around the stadium, even over the noise of the explosions. I could hear it as if he were standing next to me. I was sure the other spectators could, too.

“Well, now,” Petralka said in surprise. “Is he—Is he pretending that ball is his own egg?”

“This is unexpected,” Garius murmured. “Such spirit. Who knew lizardmen could show such vigor in the defense of their young? I always took the cold-blooded creatures to be more... dispassionate.”

Petralka made a sound of admiration in the back of her throat. “The lizards may not look like us, but it is clear that parents and children share a bond...”

I thought, or at least wanted to think, that she was voicing the feelings of everyone watching the game.

People called the lizardmen cold-blooded; took their scaly faces as expressionless. People treated them almost like bugs, as if they were emotionless machines. I don’t think anyone expected to see this display of overwhelming passion.

But it paled in comparison to what came next.

Brooke ran.

A number of obstacles kept him from taking a straight course, but he ran just the same. He juked right, then left, avoiding fire and earth and members of the other team.

"You dirty, stinking—!" One of the knights shouted and flung himself at Brooke. It just so happened that they were hidden by one of the earthen walls; it was impossible for the spectators to see what he was doing, least of all from Her Majesty's viewing box. The knight was aiming straight at Brooke. And he was deadly serious.

The knights were still quite a few points ahead, but with Brooke's entry into the game, momentum had shifted decisively in favor of the lizardmen. An upset victory looked increasingly possible, and it drove the knights to desperate measures. This guy went for the ball, but his foot connected with Brooke's ankle instead.

Brooke let out a voiceless gasp and stumbled. His bones were of course too strong to be broken by a simple human kick, let alone one intended to look like an accident. But lizardman joints weren't much less vulnerable than those of a human. Even Brooke was going to notice a hit like that.

It cut into his momentum. He couldn't roll the egg—no, the ball—so easily anymore. His footwork had been perfect until that moment, but now he was thrown off his game. The knight didn't manage to steal the ball, but when Brooke got moving again he was noticeably slower than before.

This was bad. There were three more knights heading straight for Brooke, not counting the guy who had just kicked him. Brooke's teammates had their hands full with various magical impediments and couldn't back him up.

Brooke made no sound. But he had sworn, this time, to protect his egg—no matter what he had to do. Honor. Integrity. Such things had nothing to do with this. As a man—as a father—he was going to keep his vow.

"Sshhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

For Brooke, the ball had transcended being a substitute for an egg and had *become* an egg itself. One of the eggs he had lost that day. He had been given a second chance to protect his children, and the idea had taken hold

with the force of an obsession.

Or perhaps, by that point in the game, Brooke had become completely delusional.

"Yaaaaaaahhhhh!"

He looked at his leg; he knew he couldn't run well enough to protect the egg. So instead—

"Oh! What's this?! Matoba-san's voice sounded from overhead, but Brooke paid no heed. Without a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the ball and set off at a dash.

"A handball! That's a handball! Brooke is in violation of the rules—"

As if he cared.

He was going to protect that egg, no matter what!

Brooke thought of nothing but his promise as he ran. Fancy weaving was beyond him now, but he could run. A dull pain (lizardmen *did* feel pain, even if less acutely than humans) pulsed up his leg, but he ignored it and kept moving. He held his egg tightly, safely in his arms.

"That is clearly illegal! Brooke is obviously in violation—but he won't stop!"

Truer words were never spoken. He wasn't stopping, and now no one could stop him. Brooke was the Hero.

"Can't you hear them, you bastard?!" one of the knights shouted. "You're in violation! Stop where you are!"

"Shut your foul face!" Brooke shot back, and continued running.

The next instant, there was an earthen wall in front of him.

It was that familiar spell, *Eruou Iruguna*. But with all the momentum he had built up, this time Brooke couldn't dodge it.

The fact didn't seem to bother him. If anything, he ran faster.

"Shaaaaaaa!" With a great shout, he punched through the wall with his shoulder. He managed to hit it before it was completely formed, while it was still soft, and the force of the blow was enough to bring it tumbling down. Now covered in mud, Brooke kept running.

"That son of a—!"

Now the knights were really angry.

"Somebody stop that monster!"

"Anyone! This isn't a game anymore!"

They weren't immune to Brooke's intimidation factor, but they flung

themselves at him, no longer caring about red cards or being ejected from the game. They hit him with their fists, grabbed him with their hands. But still Brooke didn't stop.

He shook off the knights, or dragged them along as he moved ever forward. He broke past first one, then another, and then he was through their blockade.

And then—

"Hold it right there!"

The soldiers weren't the only ones affected by Brooke's display of spirit.

"I'll take your holy li'l friend there!"

It was, of all people, Elvia. You could hear the *whoosh* as she jumped down onto the field, landing just in front of the goal. She—or perhaps more precisely, the beastly part of her—had been inspired by the air of battle. Now she was charging straight at Brooke, her eyes practically bloodshot.

"What the hell?!"

"Yikes! Keep away from me!"

The blood had gone to Elvia's head, and she was naturally in no state to pay any attention to the knights around her. Brooke twisted his body and used *the very knights who were still clinging to him* to ward off Elvia's attack. The men could only cry out, busy as they were holding on, but Elvia, agitated by her "phase of the moon" and protected by powerful muscles and thick fur, didn't seem to notice anything was wrong, even when Brooke was slamming knights into her. In fact, she easily sent them flying.

"Ssshhhhaaaaaaa!"

"Grrraahhhhhhh!"

They may have technically been a lizard and a werewolf, but they might as well have been a dragon and a tiger—pretty evenly matched. On top of that, the remaining knights, along with Brooke's fellow lizardmen, and even the weretiger and werebear from Elvia's team all jumped into the brawl.

"Hrrraahhhh!"

"Yaaaaaaaahhh!"

"You bastaaaaarrrddds!"

"Diiiiieeeee!"

"Eeeeyaaahhhh!"

The stadium filled with all the noise of combat.

“You know, I heard something once,” Minori-san whispered to me. When had she gotten to the viewing box?

“What’s that?” I asked, most of my attention still on the field below.

“I heard rugby started when some kid playing soccer let the blood go to his head, grabbed the ball, and started running.”

“Uh... Huh.”

“We may be witnessing the birth of Eldant rugby.”

“Yippee,” I said, raising a fist unenthusiastically.

Is this what they mean by history repeating itself? Or was this, perhaps, inevitable? They say you can’t distinguish coincidence from fate, but this was beyond even that...

“Never mind. This is no time for some half-baked monologue.”

“True enough.”

“What do we do?”

“Think we should dump a bucket of water on them?” Minori-san said mischievously.

The indolent glow of sunset turned the soccer field golden.

The field had been turned upside down, almost literally. It looked like there had been a natural disaster: here there was a rent in the earth, there, an impromptu mountain, somewhere else, a newly formed crater. It was an absolute mess. And amidst all the chaos, thirty-ish people lay collapsed.

Not like, dead, mind you. They were all simply too tired to get up. The knights. The lizardmen. The beast people who had charged onto the field—to say nothing of the elves and dwarves who had joined in after that, not entirely sure what was going on but certain they wanted to be a part of it.

The JSDF, at least, had retained their sanity. But with all this ridiculousness going on, it was actually the calm, thoughtful humans who lost out. Now the soldiers were crawling over the battered soccer field, retrieving the fallen players. Maybe it made a certain perverse sense; search

and rescue was a specialty of theirs, after all.

Right in the middle of the field, which had seen the most intense action of all, knelt a single figure.

It was Brooke.

He was holding the ball up in both hands, as if in offering to the setting sun. Elvia, incidentally, was collapsed right next to him. She looked almost as bad as the field, her face swollen and bruised. Maybe it was because she had insisted on going toe-to-toe with Brooke. But in any event, she seemed to be breathing.

"Brooke..." Myusel and I, along with Cerise, came down onto the field. "Do you... feel better?"

"Master," Brooke said, looking at me. "Was it, perchance, you who plotted to have Myusel remind me of my eggs?"

"Yes, that was me. I'm sorry for sticking my nose in your business."

Brooke was silent for a moment, staring at the ball with that same distant look in his eyes.

Finally he said, "Cerise." His voice was almost a whisper.

"Yes?"

"This does not mean our eggs have come back to us."

"No, it doesn't..."

Both of them sounded downbeat. A ball, in the end, was just a ball, and could never bring back the eggs they had lost. The children they had lost.

"But it has given me the confidence that I will be able to protect the next one."

"Brooke..." When she said her husband's name, Cerise's voice trembled just a bit.

"Would you copulate with me again, and bear my eggs?"

"I will," Cerise said, quiet but sure.

Myusel and I stood some distance away, smiling. "Ain't that just th' sweetest thang?" I said, wiping my eyes.

"What's with the drawl?"

Who should wander up at this moment of emotional climax but Minori-san and Petralka?

"Oh, uh, you know," I said.

"They sound so innocent and sweet."

Myusel nodded in agreement with Petralka's judgment. "It's wonderful,

isn’t it?” she said, smiling.

And, well, that’s the story. That’s how soccer came to the Eldant Empire —to this whole other world, in fact.

Even if I never did figure out what the heck was going on.

Epilogue

Her Imperial Majesty Petralka was in high spirits.

"What a most interesting display that was!"

It was the day after the soccer tournament, and I had shown up for my usual early-morning audience. Prime Minister Zahar and Garius were in the audience chamber with us. They both looked almost as pleased as Petralka.

"Gee, uh..."

As far as I was concerned, the tournament had been a complete disaster. To my chagrin, however, almost everyone involved rated the event highly.

I had been afraid it was going to turn into some rip-off of *Shaolin So**er*, but it was much, much worse. We ended up with what amounted to a battle royale. That was probably more interesting for the spectators, especially if the crowd didn't actually know anything about soccer. If anything, I felt like they knew *less* about soccer at the end of the game than they did at the beginning.

"We were pleased to see that the First Knights seemed rather more engaged than in the average military exercise," Petralka said to Garius. It was probably true that there were some good tactics to pick up in this "substitute for war" (never a more literal expression), given that what had happened wasn't so much soccer as it was an all-out battle that happened to involve a ball.

I learned later that military drills in the Eldant Empire tended to focus on individual skills, without much in the way of coordinated movement. Although they recognized the need for teamwork among units on the battlefield, an effective way to practice such tactics hadn't yet been developed, or so I was told. Soccer seemed like it could fill that gap.

"I must say, we were also able to observe a most unexpected side of the lizardmen," Garius put in. "To be honest, I have at times struggled to fathom what those things were thinking in the last extremity. Lizardman units can be rather difficult to coordinate with other squadrons..."

I suspected this was the first time most people had seen such raw

emotion from the lizardmen. They had pictured these “cold-bloods,” these “lizard-things,” as intimidating, or cruel, but never as passionate. It was well over a century since the lizardmen had been defeated by the humans and forced into a slave-like existence; they had buried their natural intensity and the feelings behind it so deep that most people had never seen them.

Of course, it wasn’t as if that one game of soccer was going to catapult the lizardmen to equality with humans or anything. Even I wasn’t naïve enough to believe that. It would be enough if yesterday’s events caused some people to stop and think, “Hey, those lizardmen are a lot like us in some ways.” Like I said, I’m a businessman. I wasn’t here to force anything on anyone.

“We cannot overlook the economic effects, either.” This comment came from Prime Minister Zahar, and he was beaming.

“What economic effects?” I muttered. Admission to the tournament had been free. Maybe he was thinking of the money that could be made from operating a stadium? But I hardly thought one tournament constituted a macroeconomic consideration. Maybe he expected shops to pop up around the stadium?

“How do you mean?” the Prime Minister asked. “It was your idea, wasn’t it, Shinichi-dono?”

“Er... What was my idea?”

“Ahem... I was quite sure Matoba-dono asked me to handle it on your behalf.”

“Seriously, what are we talking about?”

“The oddsmaking...”

There was a long, awkward silence.

That dirty, rotten bureaucraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!

So there’s no law against it, huh?! He’s in no position to criticize, is he?!

He acted like it had nothing to do with him, when he was the one who introduced the whole idea of gambling! A public servant!

I would have loved to give him a piece of my mind, but as it happened, Matoba-san wasn’t in the audience chamber with us that morning.

“You know Matoba-san. I’m sure he did it because he thought it would help you, Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san whispered placatingly in my ear.

“Help me?”

“It’s a quick way to make a little money so the Japanese government

will see the whole Amutech thing as profitable. A nice little line on your resume."

"..... Ah."

Given that soccer balls and everything else associated with this tournament were nonexistent in the Eldant Empire, all the supplies had come from Japan, and they weren't free. What was more, the government had been keeping a much more severe eye on what I was up to ever since I had "gone rogue." In short, to prevent a reprisal of the assassination attempt, we would have to convince the government that I was either making them money right now or would be in the near future.

Prime Minister Zahar said that the novelty of gambling on the soccer tournament had helped propel tremendous sales. Apparently everyone involved—Amutech itself, as well as the Japanese and Eldant governments—had made a considerable amount of money on the venture. As Matoba-san had said, the JSDF team, hailing as they did from the home of soccer, had been the heavy favorites—so having the knights and the lizardmen finish one-two worked out well for the house.

By the way, in the end we decided that the grand prize would be admission to the school, while the second-place finishers would receive 3TSes and PLPs. The knights boasted a comparatively high literacy rate, so adding them to the student body wouldn't be so difficult. Not to mention the political benefits, with the whole "the empress is into this stuff" angle. We figured the knights would like that. The lizardmen, meanwhile, wouldn't need to be able to read much to enjoy puzzlers, or reflex-based games like shooters. Or they could sell the handheld consoles to nobles or merchants for a pretty good price. Hence why they got the video games.

I confess, I had one more motive for this choice. The game systems needed electricity. And at the moment, the school was the only place where electricity was publicly available. So if the lizardmen wanted to play their games for very long, they would have to show up at the school. That meant they and the students would be bound to run into each other, and while that might create a little friction, I hoped it might create a little friendship, too.

If that led to future generations regarding the lizardmen with just a little less bias or resistance, I would be happy.

"The war has dragged on for some time now," Petralka said reflectively. "The fires of battle have not touched the capital, nor do we believe that they

will, but the fact remains that the situation has caused the people to spend less, and our economy is suffering. In that context, a festival-like atmosphere as was present yesterday also helps energize the market. Of course it cannot be done every day, but we believe it would be well to do something like this periodically."

"As Your Majesty says," Garius responded.

"A most perceptive comment," Prime Minister Zahar concurred.

So all's well that ends well... I guess? I honestly wasn't quite sure. I gave a small sigh that was part exasperation and part relief.

We decided to make the day after the tournament a vacation day for the school. Most of the students were going to be tired and achy anyway; I figured they would probably be sore just turning over in bed. So it was really the only thing to do. I heard that about half our pupils had headaches from overusing their magic, too. Romilda and Loek, so it seemed, had both collapsed even as they taunted their opponents.

Hence, Minori-san and I headed for home after the morning audience. Having a chance to just relax at the mansion would be a nice change of pace.

"Welcome home, sir," Myusel said, just like she always did.

"Yes, welcome 'ome," a second voice added. It was Brooke, standing beside her just outside the front door. He was rarely in the mansion when we got back—he was usually in the big garden or off tending the grounds somewhere. So he didn't often greet me when I came home. In fact, I think he often didn't notice that I had.

Today, however, was different. I saw that his clothes were clean—had he not been in the garden today, or had he changed especially to welcome me back?

He stood there, kind of looming, for a very long moment.

"Brooke?" I asked. If he had gotten changed specifically for this moment, there was probably something he wanted to talk to me about. Or perhaps...

"Brooke-san," Myusel said. She sounded encouraging, but there was a

hint of strain in her smile.

"...Aherm." Brooke gave a small nod.

Wait a second. Was Brooke... nervous? That would be surprising, but at the same time, knowing that someone like him could feel anxious brought him another step closer to me, and that made me happy.

"Master. I 'ave... a request," he said hesitantly.

"A request?" I echoed, but I already had a sense of what it was.

The whole reason that he had quit the army, fled the other lizardmen, and come here to work as a servant at my house, all despite being called a hero by his people, was because of what had happened to his eggs. But in yesterday's soccer game, he had managed to overcome that memory. That didn't mean forgetting the past, but simply not being imprisoned by it.

It also meant he had no more reason to serve at my mansion.

"Gee, it's... gonna be pretty lonely around here," I said with a sad smile.

True, it always just about gave me a heart attack when I ran into Brooke in the dark, but I really liked the forthright lizardman. After living together for all these months, he—just like Myusel, Minori-san, and Elvia—had started to feel like family. There would be a hole in our lives without him.

But if Brooke wanted to rebuild his own family, his real family, then I wouldn't stand in his way. I wasn't actually his employer, but I could at least speak on his behalf.

Then, though, Brooke cocked his head and asked, "Lonely? You expect to be lonely?"

"I mean... you're leaving, aren't you, Brooke?"

He was silent for a moment.

Uh-oh. Did I say something wrong? I really wish I were better at reading lizardman expressions.

I glanced helplessly at Myusel, who said, "No, Master, he's not. Brooke-san was just wondering if we could use another maid around here..."

"Another maid?"

Er, well, I had raised the issue of a second maid with Petralka. I could understand Myusel bringing it up, but why would Brooke—?

"Wait..."

"'S'right," Brooke nodded. He could see that it had dawned on me, what he was asking. "Perhaps, if it's all right, my wife could—?"

Even as he was speaking, someone came around from behind the house

—it was Cerise.

Sure. That was one way to play it. I had been so convinced that when Brooke remarried (?) Cerise, he would move out of our house—but if Cerise came to work here instead, well, that would be no problem, would it?

"Shinichi-sama, please give us your kindest consideration in this matter," Cerise said, bowing her head alongside her husband. And then...

"Master," Myusel said, looking at me somewhat nervously. Could it be that hiring Cerise had been her idea? "Let me add my voice..."

"Gosh, guys, you don't have to resort to all this groveling," I said with a half-smile. "It's good by me."

Myusel's face brightened immediately. Brooke and Cerise's faces didn't really appear to change at all, but then again, how would I know? I thought their tongues started to slide in and out of their mouths a little quicker, as if they were excited.

"I'm not the one who gets to make the final decision," I reminded them, "but I think it should be okay. I know Her Majesty was impressed by how Brooke played yesterday."

That much was true. It was also Brooke who had been the catalyst for the previous day's destruction, so he wasn't exactly in for a royal commendation. But a little request like this... I figured Petralka would be open to it. I had already broached the topic once, after all. And Cerise had an impeccable background.

"Thank you very much." Brooke and Cerise bowed their heads in unison.

"Sorry to put you to work right away," I said, "but do you think you could go catch our beast girl?"

I pointed to the garden, where Elvia had been kicking around the soccer ball for quite some time. She had really caught the bug. Unfortunately, it kept her from doing her art. She hadn't so much as made a sketch from the moment I had left the house this morning. If she never got away from that ball, what would be the point of having her here as our "in-house artist"?

"A simple task," Brooke said.

"Yes, right away," Cerise agreed, and then they both set off toward Elvia.

"Oh? Master lizard, here to avenge your humiliation yesterday?"

“Shut your mouth, wolf. I never knew canids had such short memories. Or have you forgotten *you* were the one collapsed on the ground at the end of that game?”

“It’s two against one,” Cerise said. “You can’t win.”

The demi-humans sounded like they were enjoying themselves. I smiled.

“I guess that counts as a happy ending for now... doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I think so,” Myusel said. Then she gave me her most beautiful smile yet.

(□□□)

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello! Light novelist Sakaki here, happily presenting Volume 3 of *Outbreak Company*.

I seem to have run out of pages for this afterword, so I'll be brief (grin).

Brooke is the main character of this volume, believe it or not. I was really keen to do a lizardman story. The seed of the plot emerged in a planning meeting with a particular company, during which Furuhashi Toshiyuki-shi* wondered aloud what would happen if modern-style soccer were to be brought into a fantasy world.

Of course, Brooke would be lonely all by himself, so I've put Elvia to work throughout the volume, starting on the cover. Mostly just to show some skin, haha.

I hope all my readers will enjoy this book from cover to cover!

Ichiro Sakaki
23 March 2012

*Note: *-shi* (from the kanji meaning "master") is an honorific often attached to the names of artists and craftspeople.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter One: Yup, It's Another World

Chapter Two: Lunatic

Chapter Three: Soccer... Soccer?

Chapter Four: The Hero Stands upon the Field

Epilogue

Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 4 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Outbreak Company: Volume 3
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 Ichiro Sakaki
Illustrations by Yuugen

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2012 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: April 2018